

NOVEL
22

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Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation



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Rifujin na
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Atofe

Rudeus

Moore

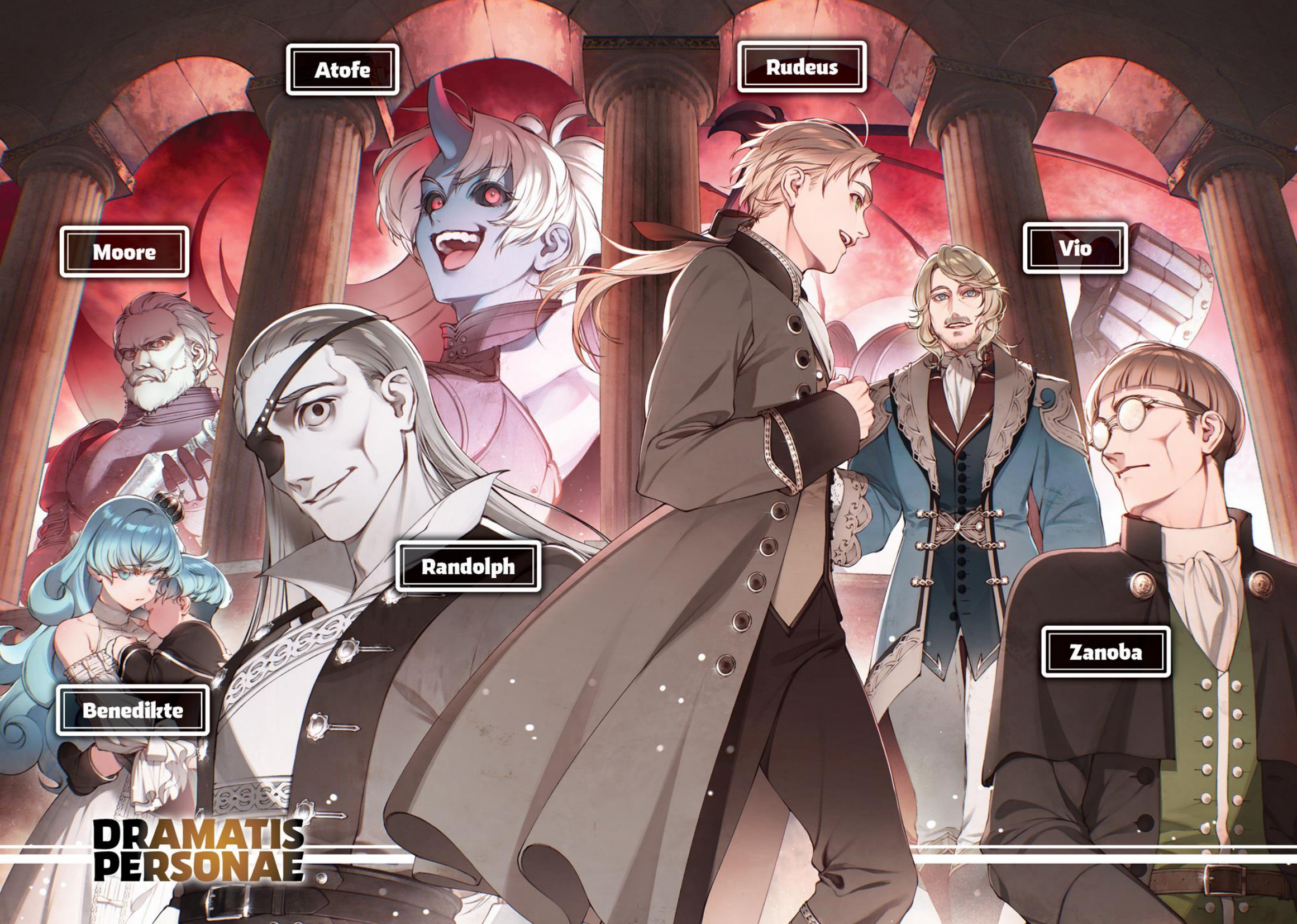
Vio

Randolph

Benedikte

Zanoba

**DRAMATIS
PERSONAE**





“Stay behind me...
I swear
I won't let you
get hurt.”

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

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ILLUSTRATED BY
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Seven Seas Entertainment

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“My communication skills have developed.”

—I dunno when it happened but along the way,
I found I didn't mind asking my friends for help.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT

TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Chapter 1: Coming Home and Making Reports

I WAS AT A HOUSE on the outskirts of the magic city of Sharia. The room stretching out before me was outfitted worthy of an evil demon king's castle. It was furnished with a luxuriant Asuran carpet and chairs crafted from mahogany and red dragon leather, overstuffed with Millis wool. The desk was light wood to match the chairs, and the ornaments—all painstakingly created by the artisans of Sharia—would've impressed anyone. The fireplace glowed, its flames faintly crackling in a cozy way that, despite myself, put my heart at ease.

You're probably wondering what part of that sounds like an evil demon king's castle. That was all in the unsettling aura that radiated off the glowering man glaring daggers at me from his seat. His presence made everywhere he went feel like an evil demon king's castle or a secret society. The atmosphere of a place is all about the people in it. The furnishings or whatever are just a footnote. It's always all about the people.

"Th-that's all I have to report for this time," I said, wrapping up my report on events in the Holy Country of Millis. My speaking venue held the kind of homey atmosphere you might find in the house of a family pretending just a little too hard that a divorce wasn't incoming.

Orsted always looked like he was on the verge of going ballistic. Maybe that was why Eris, standing behind me off to one side, was so on edge. Actually, the expression he wore now wasn't his going-ballistic face at all. *Hm, I see*. Lately, I'd gotten the hang of reading Orsted's expressions, so I knew what this face meant.

Right, so... It was about seventy percent doubt, and maybe thirty percent lack of interest. Not especially angry.

So you can settle down, Eris.

“So, about this misstep... I promise I’ll clean up the mess I made here!”

*Leave it to Kaijin Quag-Man to put down K*men R*der Geese!*

“Oh, yes, obviously, you *will* be addressing that. The thing is...”
From Orsted’s tone, I guessed these words were coming from the seventy-percent doubt part.

“Something troubles you, sir?”

“You told me all that via the contact tablet,” he explained. “Why did you travel all the way here to say it again?”

“I’m obligated to make my reports. Also, it looks like my plans will have to change from here out, so I thought a meeting was necessary.”

“I see...” Orsted said with a sigh. He sat back down. “Well? What are you planning?”

“I’ll keep it brief,” I said, clearing my throat. “As I mentioned over the contact tablet, Geese told me he’s gathering forces so that he can kill me in a head-on battle. I don’t know if he was telling the truth or not, but I plan to counter him by gathering powerful allies of my own.”

“Hm.”

Did he really have to look at me like he was grumbling, *Exactly what you told me over the contact tablet, then?*

I thought that talking in person might lead to some new developments or something, so sue me... Also, checking in is important. It’d be no good if we were each looking at the situation in different ways.

“First I want to claim the Death God in the King Dragon Realm, then Atofe, then after that I’ll go to the North God... Oh, do you know where the North God is?”

After Atofe, I wanted to go chat with the seven great powers, starting with the strongest of them:

Number five: the Death God.

Number six: the Sword God.

Number seven: the North God.

In a past meeting with Orsted, he'd told me that the North God was easier to talk to than the Sword God, so I planned to mix up the order a little and prioritize the North God.

"I know not. Every North God's been a wanderer. The slightest alteration in the course of history could make him appear on the far side of the world. After this much has changed, I cannot say."

"What about normally?"

"The second North God was on the Begaritt Continent, while the third was in the warring region of the Central Continent, I believe."

Both of those were far away, and naming entire continents hardly narrowed it down.

"Understood. Next is the Sword God, I guess."

So the order was now the Death God, Atofe, then the Sword God... Honestly, I wanted to talk to a whole lot more people. The top great powers, in order, went Technique God, Dragon God, Fighting God, and Demon God.

Apart from the Dragon God, they're all sealed away or missing, right? Wait, hold on...

"Speaking of," I said, "do you think the Technique God would ally with me? I remember you saying that he split off from the Demon God, which means he should be willing to help me fight the Man-God. Right?"

"You have better uses for your time."

"Yeah, his memories got a bit muddled, right? Okay, so what if we, like, merged him back with the Demon God Laplace to return

him to his true form—ah, wait. I guess that would make Sir Perugius mad, huh? Could you maybe, like, talk to him?”

“Enough,” Orsted growled, and I shut up. “I will not ally myself with *them*.”

Them. Now I got what he was saying. Orsted saw Laplace and Perugius as cut from the same cloth. The same probably went for all five dragon generals.

“But, um, don’t you think if Perugius knew something about Laplace he’d speak up?”

“If he becomes my enemy, I will end him.”

“...Understood.”

I could guess why he was being so obstinate. Perugius was unaffected by Orsted’s curse. Yet Orsted made no effort to get close to him, and now this stubborn refusal. But we didn’t have a lot of options here.

Still, for some reason, I hesitated to ask. I couldn’t get the question out. It felt like this wasn’t the right time.

If I asked him, *Are the secret treasures that lead to the Man-God the lives of the Five Dragon Generals?* I suspected I’d end up with either Perugius or Orsted as an enemy. I owed a lot to them both, and I didn’t want to end up in the middle of their spat. Right now, the smart move was to pretend I was still in the dark.

“Got it,” I said. “Let’s go on to the next thing.”

“Proceed.”

I changed the subject. Nothing good could come from pushing a plan Orsted had already rejected. I followed Orsted, which meant he had final say on our course of action.

“While I tried pursuing various avenues in Millis, I got the impression that your, er...authority, or whatever you want to call it, was a bit lacking.”

“That is because I have none,” Orsted replied.

Don't be silly, of course you do! I wanted to reply, but thinking about it, the Seven Great Powers were essentially athletes who'd won Olympic medals. Maybe they *didn't* have any formal authority. On the other hand, the Seven Great Powers were big names in this world. Though ordinary society tended to forget about them, people with enough status at least knew them by reputation. The Seven Great Powers included the best of the best swordsmen—the North God and the Sword God. Their disciples were employed as martial instructors and guards the world over. When you thought about how strong they were and what valuable allies they'd make to any political power, Orsted's position as number two amongst the Seven Great Powers seemed like a fairly big deal—and I was keen to put it to good use.

“Well, about that: I have a proposition,” I said.

“What is it?”

The thing was that while Orsted was a virtual nobody, Perugius was a household name. It should be easy to impress people if they thought I was in the same class as him...even if only by title.

“I've settled into introducing myself as the 'Right Arm of the Dragon God' but it's still a bit...how should I put this? It doesn't rattle people. Like, not many people are awed by the Dragon God, y'know? Or it doesn't feel that way, anyway. So I was wondering if, for clarity's sake, I could call myself the 'Dragon King.' We could do Quagdragon King or something, whatever feels good—”

“No,” said Orsted.

Wait, what?

“I forbid you from using the title of Dragon King.” He was glaring at me. Like, really glaring. Yeah, I got it. I could read his face, even when it wore an expression I'd never seen before. This was probably his “angry face”.

He's seriously hacked off. What the hell? Man, I'm trembling.



“All of them live as they please, clinging to their tattered pride. Then they die over petty grudges.”

When I didn't say anything, Orsted continued, “You are different. That is why you may not use that name, Rudeus Greyrat.”

“I...uh... Yes, sir.”

That was unexpected. I hadn't prepped for a real confrontation. I thought he'd wave me off with a disaffected, “You can call yourself what you want.”

Damn. I couldn't stop shaking.

I heard a tutting sound, just as Eris moved forwards.

“Eris, don't!” I called her off.

Relax. This isn't a fight. It's not even a falling-out. I said something that's totally at odds with the boss's plan for the company, and now he's mad. So get out of that stance, and take your hand off your sword, okay?

“I went too far. My apologies,” I said.

“No matter,” Orsted replied, and I lowered my head. Orsted's anger dissipated. Orsted always acted on the assumption he had the loops to fall back on, but some things were still non-negotiable. I'd stepped on a raw nerve without looking. Well, whatever. It didn't matter what I called myself. I could project authority in any number of other ways. My own sense of majesty might not be so easy to tap into, but I could...well, hm. I could borrow a bit of authority from Ariel and the Kingdom of Asura, maybe?

Right, let's go with that.

“Let's assume I get Ariel to lend me some authority, then. Who should I try to bring on our side after the Sword God?”

“The Biheiril Kingdom would be best. That is where the Ogre God resides. The Ore God can wait until later. If it comes to war, he will provide good-quality weapons, but he is no good in a fight.” Now

Orsted mentioned it, I did remember him saying the Ogre God and the Ore God should be brought in with the rest.

“You mean I should get the Ogre God to join us?”

“No. It’s extremely likely that he is a disciple of the Man-God. We should crush him before Geese can collect him.” Right, the Ogre God was likely to turn against Laplace. And Laplace was the Man-God’s enemy. The enemy of my enemy, meaning that the Ogre God was easy to turn into a disciple, and therefore we should crush him first. Okay, yeah, that made sense as a strategy—building up our own pieces while also taking out Geese’s, and taking them out one at a time so that five of them couldn’t descend on us at once. That was one way to go about it.

“Is there anyone else likely to be turned against us?”

“Hmmm. No, none as significant as the Ogre God,” Orsted replied. “There is the Abyssal King Vita who lives in Hell, the labyrinth on the Divine Continent, and the Vile Demon King Qeblaqabla of the Demon Continent. It would be prudent to remove those two. Moving against them first would cause problems, however, so they can be left until last.”

“I see.” They all had such wild names. I wondered if I’d have to fight them just for the crime of being *likely* to be turned by the Man-God. They hadn’t done anything yet. They weren’t disciples. Would Orsted mind if I made them *my* allies first? I wasn’t totally opposed to fighting them—if it looked like things weren’t going to work, I could fight them then. When it came down to it, I wasn’t super keen on murdering people before they’d even gotten involved in any of this.

“All right, so the plan is I either make them my allies or neutralize them.”

“Indeed.”

The details come later, I guess.

“On to the next topic. About my plans to visit the King Dragon Realm...”

After that, Orsted gave me scraps of information about the royal family and the nobles with power in the King Dragon Realm. That was where we left things.

I hadn't expected the Dragon King thing to get under his skin that badly.

Gotta be more careful next time.

“Whew...”

“Welcome back, Chairman Rudeus!” The moment I stepped out of the boss's room, the girl at reception stood up and bowed enthusiastically. A half-elf, half-human girl. She'd inherited the long lifespan of an elf, but she was still very young. She had been hired as Orsted's secretary after a series of rigorous selection processes over a large number of candidates. She spent all day sitting here, never seeing Orsted because he was always shut up in the back. She acted on his orders purely via written communication, while also meticulously taking care of administrative duties. What was her name again...?

“Oh, yes, thank you.”

“You don't look well. Is something the matter?”

“Um, not really... Sir Orsted wasn't too happy with me.”

“I see! Even you get in trouble sometimes, Chairman!”

“I might have, uh, pulled the tiger's tail this time, so to speak.”

“Oh dear... But the CEO really does rely on you, Chairman Rudeus. He may merely hold high expectations of you.”

“Hahaha. No, that wasn’t it.”

She was resistant to Orsted’s curse and considerate of others. An all-around swell lady. The only thing was, I really couldn’t remember her name. What *was* it, seriously? Faristy...or Feristaly? No, that wasn’t right. Aisha would probably know, but she was with Zenith right now in the neighboring room.

That was fine. I’d ask Aisha privately another day.

“I was thinking, if Orsted is the CEO and I’m the chairman, doesn’t it sort of sound like I’m more important than him?”

“Oh... What should I call him then?”

I wonder. Linia was the acting CEO, and Aisha was an advisor as well as the vice chief. If I was the company chairman, then that left...

“What about Commander-in-Chief?”

“...Well, he should have final approval.”

“True. Um, well, I guess run it by him,” I said.

Whatever else aside, she seemed to be doing good work here. Up till now there hadn’t been any major problems, and her cheerfulness kept everyone motivated. Orsted didn’t seem to have any complaints. I’d also been sure to hire someone in massive debt, so she had a little extra motivation to tolerate a rough day here or there.

“There haven’t been any other problems?”

“No, nothing.”

“That’s a relief. If stuff isn’t running smoothly or there’s anything else you want, please reach out to me straight away. If it’s within my power, I’ll make sure it’s done.”

“What?!” She was surprised. Why was that? It was true that our company didn’t have any labor standards it had to abide by, but I was trying to build a positive working environment.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Chairman. It's just that Sir Orsted asked me the same thing."

"Oh, did he? Huh."

"He's already made so many accommodations for me." Ordinarily anyone offered something like that, even indirectly, would be on their guard, thinking it was a deal with the devil. That had to mean the special helmet Cliff had made was doing its job, alleviating the effects of Oersted's curse. Good stuff.

"It's a shame that I can't even see his face, after all that he's done for me."

"That's the fault of the curse. The moment you saw his face, all of the gratitude you feel now would turn to hatred and distrust."

"It's horrible, isn't it?"

"It is. And that's why when Sir Orsted is working in the back there, you are never to sneak a peek through the sliding panels."

"...Wh-what sliding panels?" she repeated, confused. I coughed. Actually, so long as he was wearing the helmet a glance or two probably wouldn't hurt. But knowing Orsted, he didn't wear the helmet all day every day. We couldn't be too careful.

"Doesn't matter. I'll leave things to you then."

"Understood, Mr. Chairman."

"One more thing. Can you hint to the boss that the chairman looked really agonized?"

"Of course." She chuckled. "You know, I didn't expect you to be so timid."

Nothing surprising about it. I've always been like that. I'm about as brave as I am tall.

After that conversation, I left the office.

Right. Next up, I had to report back to my family about Zenith and the whole thing with Geese. There was a lot I needed to say. At least it wasn't all bad news, but that was cold comfort.

Lilia

THAT DAY, Elinalise was with us. She came to the house a few times a week to speak with the house's mistresses. She was married with a child and household of her own, but her husband was far away. I expected she was lonely. That feeling was most familiar to both the ladies of the house and to me. From Elinalise's manner and bearing, however, you would never have guessed that she was quietly unraveling on the inside—I imagine that was why she constantly came over seeking advice. We went over all sorts of questions, from what sort of education was appropriate for children of a certain age to small complaints.

One such question: "When do you think Aisha will learn how to behave like a grown-up?"

"I wonder the same, myself. It's not as though she can't... Well, she probably won't until she feels it's necessary."

"When might that be?"

"Say she found a boy she liked, for example..."

"I suppose Master Rudeus won't do."

"You know as well as I do that the reason Aisha keeps acting like a child is entirely because she's stunted in her role as Rudeus's little sister. She's not his lover or wife."

"Now that we're discussing it, I suppose I did know that."

“All of which is to say, you need to find someone else for Aisha. Someone charming. Someone who won’t pay her any attention unless she behaves like an adult.”

“Hmmm,” I mused. Yes, I was the one looking for advice that day. Miss Elinalise looked much younger than me, but she had the wisdom that came with age. I was grateful for how thoroughly she addressed my concerns.

“Yes. You want someone younger and a bit useless. Someone who’s got it *really* bad for grownup women.”

“Really bad, you say?”

“Exactly. Aisha should have no trouble satisfying the fantasies of a kid like that, and she can also knock some sense into that kind of boy.”

I knew perfectly well that Aisha wasn’t going to end up with Master Rudeus. He didn’t want her, and she wasn’t interested in him. Unfortunately, I couldn’t see any potential marriage candidates I brought home going down well, either.

“All you can do is to try to make it happen.”

“I see...” I replied, hanging my head, and then cried out, “Oh!” as Leo came galumphing into the dining room. Miss Lara and Miss Lucie were seated upon his back. They appeared to be playing horse.

“Woof!” Leo barked, looking at me.

How odd. He was a clever dog, and hardly ever barked unless there was a reason. It couldn’t be that something had befallen Sylphiette?!

“Woof, woof!” Leo wagged his tail, then looked from me to the front door and back again.

Ah, never mind, then. Leo was far too happy. Besides, if something happened to Sylphiette, he would have barked urgently for someone to come to him.

His gaze was fixed upon the front door. Were we to have a visitor? Leo didn't typically wag his tail for visitors. *Ah, perhaps Miss Roxy has come home*, I thought, standing up right as the lock on the front door went *click*. I rushed over to receive the arrivals.

"Oh, hey, Lilia. We're back."

"Hey, Lilia!"

"Welcome home, Master Rudeus! Miss Eris!" I cried.

There, in the doorway, was Master Rudeus, together with Miss Eris, Miss Zenith, and Aisha, and much earlier than I'd expected them. Master Rudeus's plan had been to remain in Millis for around half a year, but hardly a month and a half had passed since they left. On top of that, Master Rudeus's expression was unusually solemn...

I immediately knew what must have happened. There had been trouble. Whatever it was, it was probably Lady Claire's fault. Lady Claire wasn't a very flexible person, and also more than a little severe towards Aisha and Miss Norn. She was a devout believer in Millis and by no means a bad person, but also not one you could call "good," even if you were being nice. Thinking about their personalities, she and Master Rudeus would be like oil and water.

If I had to guess, they had a serious disagreement about something to do with family, and it had resulted in a confrontation.

"Did something happen?" I asked. Master Rudeus's already-solemn expression grew even harsher. I was sure Master Rudeus could handle any obstacle...but it stood to reason that some differences just couldn't be worked out.

"I guess you could say that," he replied. His phrasing was deliberately vague.

"Was it Lady Claire?" I asked. Rudeus looked surprised.

“No,” he replied. “Well, I mean, Claire and I did have a bit of a falling-out. We’re all good now, though. She’s not such a bad person, deep down.”

This only perplexed me further, although I felt a little relieved. For the past month and a half, I’d been beset with anxiety over not going with them. I’d thought I ought to accompany them to mediate. My worries were unfounded, according to Rudeus’s explanation. What *had* gone wrong?

“Then—” I began, but Master Rudeus looked away with a troubled expression on his face. Beside him, Aisha looked uncomfortable. Something else must have transpired. Looking at Aisha, she may have been the subject of the conflict.

“Did Aisha make a nuisance of herself?” As I’d just been saying to Elinalise, Aisha, despite being already fifteen years old, adamantly refused to behave like an adult. She was talented but persisted in acting like a child.

I was so proud of her, long ago. *This girl is a gifted child*, I’d thought. *Now I can pay back Master Rudeus for his kindness*. But if she never stopped being a gifted *child*...

“No, Aisha did her job well,” Rudeus said.

By now, even I felt like I was prying as I opened my mouth. “So why—”

Master Rudeus cut me off. “I... Look, it’s gonna be a really long story once I get into it. Can we wait until everyone’s here?”

“Of course. I beg your pardon, Master Rudeus.”

“No worries... Hey, and it’s not all bad news. I have one piece of great news. Um, I need to unpack, so watch my mom for me, okay?” Master Rudeus laughed weakly, then hurried off to his room. A worried-looking Miss Eris went after him.

Aisha and Miss Zenith stayed where they were. Aisha was sulking, but I somehow sensed that Miss Zenith was in good spirits.

“Did you behave yourself, Aisha?” I asked.

“I, um, did sort of screw up.” Ah, so not sulking. She was depressed.

That’s not like you, I thought. Ever since she was a child Aisha hardly made any mistakes, and on the rare occasions that she did she rarely owned them. Yet now here she was, admitting one without hesitation. She might have matured a little more than I’d thought.

“Was it something very bad?”

“No, Rudeus fixed it straight away.”

I fell silent. What could it have been? With that look on Master Rudeus’s face...

But never mind. He said he’d talk about it later, so I would wait.

I suddenly realized Zenith was looking at me. She reached out, looking extremely sunny, so I took her hand and led her to her room.

Later that evening, the whole family gathered. Everyone was there on Master Rudeus’s orders. Elinalise had been here already, so she was of course present, as well as Miss Norn and Miss Roxy just home from school. It was of course usual for the family to gather when Master Rudeus returned home, but much less common for him to propose it formally. We usually got everyone together only when Aisha or Miss Sylphie’s perceptive eyes deemed it necessary to talk something through. Rudeus still had that look on his face.

This was going to be important. As he began his tale, I listened with trepidation.

“Let’s get things underway. First, I successfully met my objectives in Millis. Cliff worked his way into the Church too, so there’s no need to worry about him.”

Despite a hiccup with Lady Claire, Master Cliff had established himself in the church as he had originally planned and Ruquag's Mercenary Band was up and running as a result. The church was now thoroughly indebted to Master Rudeus and he had recruited the Blessed Child as an ally of Orsted. It sounded like a total and unmitigated success. Miss Elinalise, hearing that Master Cliff had gotten himself a position in Millis, looked relieved. Sadly, Rudeus's tale didn't end there.

"Geese is a disciple of the Man-God," Rudeus announced.

Geese. That demon thief from Master Paul's old party? He was behind all the trouble that Master Rudeus encountered, and in the end, he had made a declaration of war before fleeing. I'd known him for many years, from back when we crossed over to the Begaritt Continent. Even then, he was always concerned for the welfare of Master Paul and Miss Zenith. I remembered how conscientious he had been about gathering the necessary intelligence to brave the labyrinth expedition. Geese had worked tirelessly to save Miss Roxy and Miss Zenith. While Master Paul sank into depression, Geese ran around trying to recruit powerful warriors to join the party, selling maps he'd drawn up himself for next to nothing. The whole time he'd been helping Master Paul, he never let on he'd had another agenda.

I couldn't square the Geese in my mind with the Geese Master Rudeus described—the traitor working to try and bring Master Rudeus, Miss Roxy, and the others down.

"Ever since your request to post wanted notices came, I've been wondering..." Miss Roxy said. "You're sure there hasn't been some mistake?" An experienced labyrinth explorer herself, she always regarded Geese highly. According to her, there was no one more reliable in any field except combat.

“If only...if only I could say it was.” Master Rudeus gave a sad smile, then pulled a letter from his pocket. Miss Roxy took it from him and read over the contents. Her usually sleepy expression darkened, but she nodded, accepting it at once. She passed the letter to me. When I looked at it, I understood.

The letter had a lighthearted and friendly tone despite its contents. Something about that told me instantly—this really was Geese. It wasn’t that he hated Master Rudeus or Miss Roxy, or that he’d been plotting to destroy them from the start. He and Master Rudeus happened to be opposed, but it wasn’t the sort of enmity that came from a grudge.

“Making the occasional gesture like this, telling you out of a sense of fairness when he usually never bothers... That’s very like Geese, in a way,” Miss Elinalise said with a sigh.

When I thought back, this kind of thing had frequently occurred in the inner palace in Asura. The fierce power struggles of that country had turned scores of people who had no real personal enmity against one another. However, once circumstances had turned a man against his fellow, custom dictated that he should meet his new enemy in a fair fight. This letter modeled that mentality.

“I know Geese did a lot for all of you, so I’m sorry to have to say this,” Master Rudeus said, “but it looks like I’ll have to fight him...and kill him.”

The words seemed to pain him greatly. It might not have been obvious, but I think Master Rudeus thought highly of Geese. Miss Eris described them as good friends and had told me that they called each other “boss” and “newbie.” The way Geese talked about Master Rudeus’s achievements as though they were his own made me think he truly loved Master Rudeus. Of everyone, this was probably hardest for him.

“Oh, Rudy...” said Miss Sylphie. She didn’t seem to know what else to say.

By contrast, Miss Roxy’s face was hard. “Geese. Our Geese...” she muttered.

She, like me, had been in that party with Geese. She had relied on him. She’d accepted this new revelation quickly, however. There was no doubt in her eyes. On the contrary, I got the feeling she was determined to be a rock of certainty for Master Rudeus’s sake.

“Anyway,” Master Rudeus went on, “it looks like I’ll be away for a long time again. You have Leo here to protect you, but there’s no telling what Geese might do. I want you all to be careful and stay out of harm’s way, okay?”

I wasn’t going to allow any of us here to become a liability to Master Rudeus. I would work together with the rest of the family to ensure that the whole household was kept safe so that Master Rudeus could fight without worrying about us. He was always fretting, always looking back over his shoulder. He couldn’t see how committed we were. It was a good quality to be sure, but when he failed to rely on us it made him feel remote. Though I suppose, from the perspective of someone like Master Rudeus, we must have seemed terribly fragile.

“I’ll make sure of it,” Roxy replied. “Rudy, if Geese is moving against you, this isn’t plain old work for me anymore. Whatever you need, tell me.”

“The same goes for me,” Sylphie added. “I can’t do anything right now, but I’m here for you, Rudy.” They were playing to their personalities as always.

“Yeah, no question!” Miss Eris added, right as Aisha said, “You got it!” They both spoke like there was no other possible response.

“I understand the situation,” said Miss Norn. She looked unsure, but her nod was determined.

I approved too, of course. "I cannot be of much aid," I said, "but I will ensure I do not become a hindrance to you."

If not for the old injury to my knee, perhaps I could have spoken more confidently. The answer I gave was as much as my strength would allow.

"Thank you," Master Rudeus said. "As I said, I likely won't be home for a while. I think for now, though, we can call this family meeting to a close—"

"Wait, Big Brother," Aisha cut in. "You need to tell them about Zenith."

"Oh, yeah."

Miss Zenith. I felt my body stiffen. I remembered then that the mistake Aisha hadn't wanted to talk about was also yet to come up and grew even more nervous. But Master Rudeus was smiling.

"So actually, I found out all about the curse on Mom," he said. This had to be the good news he'd mentioned then, not Aisha's mistake. "She has a curse on her that allows her to read minds. Not that she can see everything, but...it looks like she understands all of us really well."

Master Rudeus relayed all that the Blessed Child had told him and then described how Miss Zenith saw the world around her. Tears ran down my cheeks as a great wave of memories washed over me. There had been plenty of signs, now that I knew to look for them. Miss Zenith had always been one step ahead on tending to the garden, and when Miss Lucie was still small, Miss Zenith seemed to know when she would cry before it happened. Then there was...well. I wasn't sure how to describe it. Miss Zenith knew about Paul. We all assumed she didn't realize he'd died. We thought that, if her memories ever returned, she would be distraught. But she knew everything. Not only that, but she had accepted it and had started moving on. When that sank in, I couldn't stop crying.

“Lilia...” Master Rudeus said.

“I’m so sorry. Master Rudeus...” There wasn’t a dry eye in the room, but I was the only one who buried my face in my hands and sobbed. I’d done nothing but cry recently. When I was young, I hardly ever shed tears. I didn’t think my emotions had such a hold on me. It could be another sign I was getting older.

Aisha stroked my back as I wept, then when my tears finally subsided, Miss Zenith came and laid a hand on my head and set the sobs in motion once more.

Rudeus

MY REPORT BACK to the family was done. They all gave their usual encouraging responses—words that made me feel like I could rely on them. I knew Lilia and Roxy in particular had complicated feelings about Geese, but they both agreed to the necessity of taking him down without any complaints or misgivings.

Next up was Zanoba. I planned on paying a visit to the King Dragon Realm, so I’d have to run it past him before I departed his company. He’d have his own thoughts on the matter, no doubt.

Eris, Sylphie, and Roxy all came with me. We took the Mercenary Band’s carriage to The Zanoba Store. The main item on the agenda was making a checklist for powering up the Magic Armor.

“All right, let’s go with that, then,” I said when he laid out his ideas.

It was time to resume development on the Version Three. Beyond that, I’d need another trick to keep up my sleeve. Geese already saw the Magic Armor, so he’d figure out some way to counter it. I wanted another secret weapon.

When I explained all that, Zanoba replied confidently, “I’m only too happy to help.”

“As am I,” Roxy cut in. “My knowledge of magic circles has grown substantially over the past few years. I believe I can be of some assistance.”

Assistance, you say? I mean, I’m grateful, I’m just not sure that’s a good idea...

The fact was, the Magic Armor was now so complex even I couldn’t do much more than assemble it and power it on.

“Are you sure?” I said. “It’s not the kinda thing you can go into lightly.”

Roxy pouted. “Rudy, dear, you do know who you’re talking to, right?”

“F-forgive me!” I stuttered.

I went a bit crazy for a second there! I ought to know there’s nothing Miss Roxy can’t do! I don’t know what I was thinking! I’m a buffoon! A total lost cause! I should die right here!

“I did all that study for *you*, Rudy. I went over all of Zanoba and Cliff’s research notes so I could help with maintenance and upgrades.”

“Roxy...!”

That’s right, back in Shirone she could draw Fire Saint-tier magic circles...

It occurred to me that maybe she hadn’t always been able to do that. Maybe she’d learned that when she researched magic circles after going back to the university.

“Okay then,” I agreed. “I’m putting the Magic Armor—and my life—in your hands, Master!”

“I accept it,” she replied.

I'd assumed that with Cliff gone, the Magic Armor research would stagnate, but I'd made a happy miscalculation. Any armor Roxy made for me would be worth an army by itself. She could've made something dangerous out of cardboard, if she had to; I'd still take on three Orstedes at once in it and wipe the floor with 'em!

"I'm no Cliff, though, so don't raise your expectations too high," Roxy said. She looked proud of herself despite that, presumably due to confidence in her abilities. I wondered if she didn't already have some plans for improvements worked out.

"Hahaha. Now that the master's master here, there'll be nothing left for me to do!" Zanoba said, and we all laughed.

"Right, Zanoba," I went on. "There's another reason I came here today."

"Oh? Whatever it is, it sounds serious. Mayhap you caught wind of my acquisition of a fascinating new figurine the other day? My friend, it is *quite* the specimen! Crafted from a unique material. Its limbs are quite supple—"

"I'm going to the King Dragon Realm," I said, shutting Zanoba up mid-sentence, "to see Randolph. You're coming, right?" Zanoba took my hand, squeezing it tightly. Thanks to the Zaliff Prosthesis it was cold, but the strength of his grasp was precisely calibrated to not crush my hand.

"Thank you, Master," he said.

Yeah, yeah, enough with the thanks. Are you coming or not?

"I'll pack my things at once."

That means you're coming, yeah? All righty, then.

Zanoba *had* been begging to know when I would expand into the King Dragon Realm since forever ago. It made perfect sense for him to come along. He'd spent the entire time worried sick about the child Pax left behind.

“Hold your horses,” I said. “It’s not like I’m leaving right this second.”

“Oh, right. I beg your pardon... Then I’ll find someone to take over the shop first. Though I hardly have any work right now!” Zanoba cackled.

The Zanoba Store was growing every day. The number of shopfronts and employees had increased, and these days almost everything was handled by on-site workers. As the head of the organization, Zanoba’s job was now making final decisions on major projects, interviewing for executive positions, and doing quality assurance checks on products from each location. Given that The Zanoba Store itself was a bit like a subsidiary of our Orsted Corporation, and that he didn’t have to be involved in any decision-making, well... There *wasn’t* much for him to do here, if I was brutally honest.

“All right, just make sure you’re quick.”

“Understood,” he replied, and with that, I went on my way.

We weren’t going to the King Dragon Realm because something had happened. I didn’t expect anything *would* happen. But given my track record, the chances of us getting mixed up in something were high. We might run into Geese trying to recruit Randolph, for example. Okay, that was unlikely, but I wanted to go in with appropriate caution even so.

One person stayed uncharacteristically quiet on the way home.

Eris stared out of the window of the carriage, apparently deep in thought. Maybe she was thinking about Geese. Whatever she might say now, Eris had taken a liking to Geese back when she met him in

the Great Forest. I remembered her telling me she'd get him to teach her to cook. She didn't gel with a lot of people, but Geese was different.

Sylphie suddenly squeezed my hand. I looked up.

"Everything okay, Rudy?" she asked.

"...Huh? Oh, yeah, it's fine." I didn't know what "it" was or how it was fine, but I said it anyway. The whole Geese situation was a big shock, but there were plenty of other things that were fine. Sylphie's belly had gotten bigger since I left to take Zenith home to the Holy Country of Millis. The pregnancy had been detected about three months in, and since then another month and half had passed, so rounding up she was about five months along or so.

"How 'bout you, Sylphie?" I asked.

"I was never close to Geese like the rest of you."

"Oh, right." That wasn't what I meant. Hey, though, if she wasn't bringing up the pregnancy, I could assume it was going well. This was her second child, after all. Made sense for her to be a seasoned pro by now.

Still, I couldn't get complacent. The Man-God had said something, long ago, about how people's destinies get ambiguous when they're pregnant, and that makes them easier to kill. Because the Man-God gave that ominous warning, I'd summoned a guardian beast on Orsted's suggestion. I was pretty sure Sylphie would be fine, but I couldn't shake all my anxiety. I was sure I'd done everything I could, but even so...

Ah.

Unable to believe my own words as I spoke, I announced, "Until I deal with Geese, I'm giving up sex."

Sylphie stared. Roxy gaped. Eris narrowed her eyes at me.

“Um, okay. If that’s what you want, Rudy,” Sylphie said. “I don’t mind, I just...um...?”

“I don’t mind either,” Roxy said dubiously. “Although...is this some kind of religious gesture?”

“I told you, right? The Man-God said it’s easier to target you when you’re with child. Geese might try and use that as well, so I think we should stop for now.”

They all looked at me like this was the first they were hearing of it. Maybe I *hadn’t* told them. Or maybe I’d told them and they forgot. People’s memories often go hazy.

“Guess we have no choice,” Eris said tersely, turning to look out the window again. She didn’t sound happy, but she didn’t argue. “Hard to imagine you sticking to a vow like that though, Rudeus.”

Harsh. Apparently my nether regions were untrustworthy. I didn’t trust them, either. They were behaving themselves for now, but when you’re holding a loaded gun, your trigger finger gets itchy. That’s just what men are like. Once it’s cocked, it won’t be long till it fires.

“No way Sylphie can go cold turkey, either,” Eris added.

“Erm... I’ll stick to it if that’s what Rudy wants.”

“As if. The moment Rudeus says, ‘Let’s just fool around a bit,’ you’ll give in, like ‘Well, if it’s just a bit...’ Right?”

“...Yeah,” Sylphie admitted.

Surely touching was okay, though. Say I held her close and left the ammunition in the barrel... *Just a bit.* That kind of thinking would be the death of me.

“That’s why I’ll be at Rudeus’ side at all times, ready to beat him up if he tries anything.”

So if I try to get busy, one wallop from Eris and I’m out like a light. Then when I wake up, all’s forgotten. Perfect.

“Thanks, Eris,” I muttered.

Right. From this day on, I’m Rudeus the Celibate. This’ll be no sweat.

Chapter 2: Randolph's Woes

WE ENDED UP with a party of five for our journey to the King Dragon Realm—me plus Eris, Aisha, Zanoba, and Julie. I didn't plan on Julie coming along originally, but she'd clamped on tight to Zanoba's waist and wouldn't let go. I think after Shirone she'd sworn to herself that next she'd go with him no matter what. Come to think of it, she'd tagged along when we set up a Zanoba Store branch in the Asura Kingdom too, no questions asked. She was crazy about Zanoba, no kidding. You just wanted to be like, "Tell him how you feel already!" except there were no signs that Zanoba reciprocated her feelings. Zanoba had his own complicated history with marriage, so I wouldn't get my hopes up.

Ginger, maybe because she saw all that, decided not to come and instead took over managing the head office of The Zanoba Store. She told me to take good care of Zanoba.

Anyway, while we were in town, Aisha was going to set up an office for Ruquag's Mercenary Band while Julie established a Zanoba Store branch. Meanwhile, Zanoba, Eris, and I would meet with Randolph.

With that, we made our way to the King Dragon Realm. As usual, we traveled by teleportation circle to a nearby location, then walked the rest of the way to the capital city. Wyvern. How long had it been? Seeing the city again after such a long time, it struck me as messy. The buildings were all different heights, and the people were equally disparate. The town had sprung up without any plan, so you ended up with a layout where an inn for adventurers stood right next to a noble's mansion. Across from the Sword God Style training hall there was a North God Style training hall, then a Water God Style training hall right behind that.

The city was a cacophonous mess, but it was brimming with life.

Despite its history, there were no divisions of class here. It was a nation built on meritocracy and imperialism. It wasn't a bad place, in my opinion. But as with all nations, it certainly had a dark side.

When I arrived, I took a day to recover at the inn, then went straight to the royal palace.

I hadn't forgotten to make an appointment with Randolph and Benedikte together the day before. My impression was that Benedikte didn't strike quite as lofty a figure while we were in the King Dragon Realm, but royalty was royalty. If I snubbed her, that could be taken as an insult by the whole royal family. I mean, even if none of them took it personally, there was my reputation to consider. Nations are like the yakuza. They're always looking for an excuse to start a fight.

That in mind, I arranged a carriage with a white horse, rustled up some fine clothes suited for the occasion, then headed to the King Dragon Realm palace. It wasn't as vast as the one in Asura, nor as refined as the one in Millis. The word that sprang to mind was "bizarre." After numerous extensions, it now sprawled both up and out. It was crude and slapdash, as though someone had tacked on piece after piece as each became necessary.

Something about it was intimidating in a way I couldn't describe. That vibe would probably make me think twice if I were thinking about attacking it. I wasn't planning to attack it this time, though, so its oppressive aura fell flat.

My appointment got us into the palace without a hitch. We were shown to Benedikte's quarters.

"People are staring," Eris remarked as we followed our palace servant guide. I guess we did stand out. All the knights and nobles in their finery turned to gawk at us.

“Act like you’re supposed to be here,” I said. This time I was here as a friend of Randolph’s. I had no reason to feel ashamed.

Okay, I had one. Orsted was guilty of killing their king. I didn’t think that was common knowledge, though...

If we get busted, I’ll get Ariel to help us out, I thought, right as we arrived at Benedikte’s chambers.

“Great. Eris, Zanoba, you’re both ready?” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Of course.”

“If it turns out the Death God is our enemy, the two of you hold him at bay while I prep the magic circle for the Version One. Then I end things here. Okay?”

“You got it!” Eris replied.

“Indeed, though I do hope it doesn’t come to that...”

Eris and I were a formidable combo in battle. I could count on her to have my back if the Death God turned out to be our enemy.

Zanoba was a reliable tank so long as our opponent didn’t have any magicians. I was a bit worried about Aisha and Julie, who I’d left behind...but I couldn’t keep them safe everywhere all the time. All I could do was hope that they could get through half a day without incident.

Enough dawdling. Time to go.

For a room in a royal palace, the place was sparse. It was the absolute smallest space with the absolute minimum number of ladies-in-waiting they could get away with.

“Welcome, Lord Rudeus. It’s been a long time.” There he loomed, the world’s top bodyguard: Death God Randolph Marianne. He looked ghoulish as he stood there, standing between me and his employer, Benedikte, and the baby in her arms. Benedikte didn’t speak, but when she looked at me her mouth tightened and she clutched the baby to her. She looked to be on the verge of tears.

First things first. I decided to greet her before Randolph. That seemed like good manners.

“Queen Benedikte. I hope I find you well,” I said.

She didn’t grace me with a reply, but I guess I couldn’t blame her. She must have heard the story of what happened that day by now. Pax was bound to have told her about me and Zanoba before that, and I seriously doubted he had any compliments for us.

Here Zanoba stepped forwards. “It’s been too long,” he said. “Queen Benedikte, I am Zanoba, at your service.” He leaned toward them, disrespectful of personal space as ever. Benedikte drew back while Randolph stepped forwards, but Zanoba remained undeterred. “I am glad to see his Highness, the prince, in good health as well.”

A long silence loomed. Randolph stared at Zanoba in consternation. I wished he’d look at me too. Here I was, grabbing Zanoba’s shoulder to try and get him to step back. Of course I couldn’t budge him.

“Ah. My apologies. Should I have said princess?” Zanoba asked.

Benedikte slowly shook her head. Male heir, confirmed.

“May I ask his name?”

“Pax,” she replied after a weighty pause.

“He was named for his father,” Randolph added. “Pax the second.” They’d given him his dad’s name. I wondered if he’d get called Pax Junior or Li’l Pax or something.

Well, isn't that wonderful? I should call my next son Rudeus Junior or something. No, scratch that. I'd doom him to become a perv.

"I see. A fine name. May he grow up strong and hardy like his father." Zanoba was cheerful, but he faltered at the terror in Benedikte's face. "Ah... It appears I have frightened you, Your Majesty. I apologize. I have always had that effect upon people. Please rest assured I do not mean you any ill." He stepped back, but the vibe of the room stayed awkward.

Uh-oh.

"Um," I began. "Oh, I know. Allow me to introduce my wife."

Eris stepped forwards. "I'm, er, Eris Greyrat...Your Majesty," she stammered. Nothing from those etiquette lessons had stuck. I'd chosen the wrong party for this mission. I should have brought Aisha. She knew how to be charming and friendly. But then I'd be in big trouble if Randolph went on the offensive.

Benedikte didn't reply to Eris. She sat looking at Randolph with a nervous expression. Thus, Randolph was the one who answered.

"I remembered your wife as being demonfolk, Sir Rudeus..." He talked without looping the Queen in on the conversation, but then, with her being so tight-lipped, it'd be ruder for him to defer to her and say nothing at all.

"I have three wives," I explained. "Roxy is one of them."

"Oh? That can't go over well with the Millis Church."

"One of my friends is a priest and he lectures me every chance he gets." I faced Randolph properly. "It's good to see you, Randolph." He was exactly as I remembered him, with his skeletal face and unsettling smile, in a stance that would appear vulnerable to an observer who had no knowledge of him. In reality, he was anything but. You could tell from Eris's tightly drawn lips.

"You look well," I said.

"I am, very much so. I always am. I cannot say the same for you, Lord Rudeus."

"A friend of mine turned out to be an enemy."

"I know the feeling well. As a youngster, I was forced to kill a friend. It was a deeply troubling experience," Randolph said. His attention kept flicking to Eris as he spoke. He nodded, simultaneously shifting and adjusting his position almost imperceptibly to put himself between her and Benedikte.

"Eris," I said, "Could you stand a couple of steps further back?"

"What? Why?"

"Randolph seems uncomfortable," I explained. Eris already had him well within range of her blade. On top of that, she was adjusting her position so that I wouldn't be caught in between them. The two were shuffling around like warriors sizing each other up, escalating to increasingly dangerous stances. If I let this continue, I could well have a fight on my hands.

"He might be our enemy," Eris protested.

"If he was, he wouldn't have let you in here with a sword in your hand."

He surely wouldn't have allowed Benedikte to be in the room, either. Randolph wouldn't fight a Sword King and a magician with his dear charges behind him. He'd lie in wait for us alone, or with a group of allies. I'd dismissed Randolph as an enemy from the moment I saw Benedikte. It was *possible* Benedikte was secretly a warrior, I suppose, but I wanted to believe Randolph would do a far better job of setting a trap than this. He could be playing a *really* long game and maintaining his cover for now, but if I started thinking like that, there'd be no end to it. This meeting here and now wasn't a trap. For now, I was going to trust him.

"...Fine," Eris said at last. She slunk back close to the entrance. Her hand kept a tight grip on her sword.

“My apologies, Lord Rudeus,” Randolph said.

“Not at all, I’m the one who should apologize,” I replied. “I’m afraid our schedule is quite busy, however...”

“Because of that friend of yours? Care to elucidate?”

“I’d love to. That’s why I’m here, after all.”

I told him what happened in the Holy Country of Millis: how Geese the demon had turned out to be my enemy; how he had no fighting skills, but he could talk his way out of anything; how with his silver tongue and the Man-God’s wives, they were gathering powerful warriors. I told him how, in order to stop Geese, I had wanted notices out for him all over the world and planned to make key powerful warriors my allies.

“That’s a very honest way to fight,” Randolph observed.

“I couldn’t come up with anything better.”

“No, no, I meant it as praise. Even a clever opponent will run out of good ideas if you smash each trick to pieces as it comes without overthinking it.”

Randolph gave a rattling laugh. Was he speaking from experience? Immortal demons seemed like they’d be good at that sort of thing.

“Anyway, that’s how things stand,” I finished. “I hope I can count on your support.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Randolph said, “but there’s no good reason for me to help you. I don’t especially want to get tangled up with the Man-God, either.”

“What if I told you the Man-God was King Pax’s sworn enemy?”

“Oh?” Randolph said, sounding interested. “What’s this? Do tell me more.”

I told him how the incident in Shirone had been the Man-God’s plot, who the disciples were, and what they’d done. Randolph

listened until I finished, then laughed. His cheekbones jutted out unsettlingly; his laugh was a harsh croak.

“Well, then, that’s a different story. I’ve longed for the chance to avenge Lord Pax.” He grinned. His face was so creepy. It was the kind of face you expected to see behind a major betrayal, but it just goes to show you: you can’t judge a book by its cover.

He had agreed without much drama. Things looked promising...until Randolph continued.

“Unfortunately,” he said, “I’m rather busy here myself.”

Hold up. That means this isn’t going smoothly.

“May I ask with what?”

He chuckled. “Ah, how the tables have turned.”

His confidence put me on the back foot. I chalked it up to Randolph’s typical banter.

“Don’t go saying that until you’ve got the upper hand,” I retorted.

“But I *do*. You’re here because you need my help, correct?”

Damn, that sounded like the upper hand, all right. I had no choice but to listen to his demands. Fine. What sort of ridiculous task was he going to throw at me? Could this be another part of Geese’s scheme?

“Worry not, it’s nothing too arduous,” he said. He stepped out of his position defending Benedikte to one that left her exposed. Benedikte sat there holding the baby with something like fear in her eyes. Of what, I didn’t know.

“As I am sure you are all aware, this country has been in an ongoing state of unrest.”

The King Dragon Realm had become deeply unsettled after Orsted killed their king back in Shirone. Still, the previous king had foreseen it and named his successor. The new monarch was placed

on the throne at once, and the King Dragon Realm gradually returned to stability—on the surface. Whoever had killed the old king was a mystery. A foreigner? Someone inside the palace? The culprit's motive was similarly unclear. No matter how placid the face they presented to the world, the palace was irreconcilably divided, with everyone jumping at shadows. They governed under a shroud of fear.

“We are not directly involved in this unrest. However, some see the queen's child as an inconvenience.”

Aha. He was worried about Pax's child. Benedikte was the daughter of the old king. She'd been treated as if she didn't exist; she was wed off to Pax, former prince of the Kingdom of Shirone, so the King Dragon Realm could get rid of her.

I mean, that wasn't such a bad set of facts. A use had been found for an extraneous princess. That was all.

But after she'd married Prince Pax, he was killed in a civil war, and as she'd borne his child, everything looked different. Pax's murderers were well underway rebuilding the Kingdom of Shirone. They had their hands full and couldn't move against her at present, but their grudge against Pax burned as bright as ever. And why shouldn't it? The late prince had murdered their beloved royal family.

“Personally, I think they'll be swallowed by the Northern empire long before they're done rebuilding, but many still have concerns...”

Royal bloodlines were such a pain. In a country like Shirone, only a legitimate descendant of the previous monarch could ascend the throne. Thus, the current rulers of Shirone wouldn't be happy that Pax's son had survived. If the Kingdom of Shirone stabilized, they'd probably show up in a few years demanding Benedikte's child. Just a little infanticide as a token of friendship between the Kingdom of Shirone and the King Dragon Realm.

But Li'l Pax was still the grandson of the old king of the King Dragon Realm. If a vassal state came up saying, "Hand him over" and they went, "Sure, here you are," that wouldn't reflect well on their reputation. On the other hand, if they didn't hand him over, that would sour relations with Shirone.

So plans were in motion to eliminate the point of contention before it came to that, it seemed. Kill Li'l Pax before Shirone came asking for the same.

"What? You want the kid?" they'd say. "Damn, I hate to tell you this but he died in a tragic accident. What an unforeseeable tragedy! Ah, well. I'm sure you understand, right?" That way, the King Dragon Realm and the Kingdom of Shirone could both get out with their reputations intact.

The only one who'd come out worse for wear would be Randolph.

"They want him dead badly enough to fight Death God Randolph?" I said doubtfully.

"Many see avoiding war between our two nations a higher priority than avoiding my blade. I believe various other fears are at play, besides...but then, I understand little of politics, and lately I've had my hands full guarding Queen Benedikte. I don't know any more than that."

Makes sense.

Right now, the political heart of the King Dragon Realm was in a state of unrest. There was no way other countries weren't looking for a way to exploit that. Even if they couldn't openly attack the King Dragon Realm, they could, for example, harass its vassal states. That seemed more than likely.

If Shirone, their bulwark to the north, then turned against them, well... A lot of people were worrying along those lines, I bet.

Personally, if it were me with Randolph standing ahead, I'd be more worried about making an enemy of him.

"There's no point sending assassins and their ilk so long as I'm here, of course. Many fail to realize that..."

"Assassins?"

"Indeed. They don't realize they'll have to go through me until they get here—some turn pale, some weep while begging for their lives, some turn around and leave again. There have been quite a few."

"Scary..."

Orsted told me that the Death God Randolph Marianne of the Seven Great Powers was well-known in the assassin trade—though you could assume that much from his name. People said if you wound up making an enemy of him, you'd better kill your employer and make a run for it.

The ones doing the employing presumably didn't know about that.

I imagined how it felt to be a hapless assassin, coming face-to-face with the Death God. *He's a terrifying dude, right? I get it, it was like that for me when I challenged Orsted.*

"I don't object to guests, but if things go on like this, the prince's future is...*well*," Randolph finished pointedly. Their situation wasn't about to improve, no matter how many assassins he cut down. In the end, all they had to look forward to was Shirone's demand for the baby.

He could refuse, but that would damage his reputation here. If they handed Li'l Pax over, the kid would probably end up being executed, regardless of the wording of the bargain. No matter how the dice fell, Li'l Pax wouldn't be allowed to live in peace.

Unless...

“Let’s say I find you a way out. Would I still have no chance of convincing you to join the battle against Geese?”

“No chance at all,” Randolph replied. “But you need allies in the King Dragon Realm, do you not?” I didn’t reply, but Randolph continued anyway. “It would be a great reassurance to have me as your ally. Everyone says as much; they feel they can rely on me. And there might be other advantages for you.”

“I imagine so,” I said.

Randolph wasn’t going to fight at my side. That left chances for the opposite outcome: he could be taken in by the Man-God—or rather, by Geese’s smooth-talking—and show up on the other side. Even if I helped him here, I couldn’t rule out him turning against me.

“Sir Randolph,” said Zanoba, stepping forwards. “There is no need for convoluted conditions. Although I no longer lay claim to royal blood, the prince is my kin and I served his father. I have no stake in the power struggles of the King Dragon Realm. If you are in trouble, I will of course help you.”

Hm, true. We had no reason to abandon Randolph now simply because he might turn against us later.

“Lady Benedikte,” Zanoba said, kneeling before her. Down on one knee, his face was about level with the sitting Benedikte’s. Eye to eye, he said, “As Pax’s older brother, I am also your brother. Will you not permit me to help you and the prince?”

Benedikte stayed silent for a few long seconds, eying Zanoba sidelong... Then at last, with painful hesitation, she held out a hand to Zanoba.

“I-I would be happy for your aid,” she said.

“I am yours to command.” He took her hand and kissed it. They might say if you want to kill a general, first go for his horse...but Zanoba had gone for the general and scored a perfect headshot. I shouldn’t be surprised—this was why he’d come. When you weighed

the pros and cons, it wasn't a bad deal for either of us. As Randolph himself had said, I'd secure myself a reliable ally in the King Dragon Realm, and not just Randolph. Benedikte and Li'l Pax— if, through some twist of fate, he ended up wielding power once he came of age—would both be assets. This bond would pay off ten, maybe twenty years down the line. A long-term investment. The Orsted Corporation was always looking to the future.

This mess was our CEO's fault, when it came right down to it. As his follower, it was my responsibility to do something about it.

"Indeed. I shall be glad of your assistance," Randolph said.

The Death God must have known all that. He'd hidden his hand brilliantly.

You sly bastard...

Anyway. That's how Zanoba and I ended up agreeing to clean up the mess in the King Dragon Realm.

Chapter 3: The Politics of the King Dragon Realm

NOTHING IS EVER simple.

Imagine you have kid A being bullied by kid B. Okay, you beat up kid B and kid A is safe, right? But more often than not, that isn't how it works. So long as everyone perceives kid A as the kid who gets bullied, everyone looks down on them. You end up with kid C and kid D picking up where the first bully left off.

So! How to make kid B stop? First off: why is kid B bullying kid A? Do bullies even need a reason? Was there something about kid A that led to their being bullied? It does happen. I assumed that was the case for me in my past life, at least.

I thought the King Dragon Realm might be telling a similar story. Benedikte might be getting bullied due to the unlucky fact she had demon blood in her veins. I wasn't gonna stand for it, if that was the whole deal. I'd beat the crap out of kid B.

But what if there was more to it? Maybe there was some outside cause that was stressing out kid B, and they took it out on kid A. If so, kid B might stop if you removed that outside cause. Removing it and then pointing out all the downsides of carrying on bullying kid A should be enough to make them stop actively seeking a target to bully. Hopefully, kid B was smart enough to see that.

So, the question became, what might the outside cause be? To find out, your intrepid hero ventured into the heart of the deepest jungle... No, okay, I just legged it to the training grounds to ask someone who knew the ins and outs of King Dragon Realm politics. Randolph said I'd find a man there called Shagall who could tell me what I wanted to know.

As you might expect, I'd heard about this individual from Orsted too. He was one of the top dogs in the whole of the King Dragon

Realm: Shagall Gargantis, the General Paramount of the King Dragon Realm. He was a quarter elf and had a characteristically rough way of speaking, but he was decisive and a man of action. And he had a moniker: the Generalissimo.

He was also the one who'd recruited Randolph—the Death God wasn't interested at all, but Shagall barraged him with visits and offered him every favor under the sun to persuade him to take the post. The guy clearly had a good eye for talent.

The chances that he was a disciple of the Man-God were low right now, for the record, but if the King Dragon Realm ever seemed in danger of falling, those odds would skyrocket. I guess he was a patriot.

"They're an energetic bunch."

"Sure are," I said, looking out over the training grounds with Randolph's letter of introduction clutched in my hand.

Someone who looked like a receptionist had told me that without an appointment, I'd have to wait until training was done. Zanoba was with me too, by the way. Eris wasn't. I'd put her on bodyguard duty for Aisha and Julie.

The training grounds were oval in shape and about the size of a baseball pitch, ringed by tiered spectator seats like the colosseum. Down on the ground, soldiers in teams of six fought one another, their strategy dictated by their leaders' orders. Shagall himself was sitting where he could see the whole scene. He watched the match intently while ordering a few underlings to take down notes. He held these military drills regularly in small groups to improve the skills of his officers. I wasn't sure if it was because these officers were more suited to commanding armies, but individually they weren't noteworthy combatants. Maybe there was something in there that they could use, though.

The soldiers crept through the training ground, hunting for their enemy as they weaved through the various obstructions. They used hand signals to communicate with their allies, then surrounded the enemy, staged a fake attack while pinning them down, then obliterated them.

“Ah, they’re reenacting the Battle of Zacharia,” said Zanoba.

“You can tell?” I asked.

“I’ve studied it. That man there, he’s the right flank. That was an army of water magicians who, unbeknownst to the enemy, were swapped out for fire magicians. All the enemy’s counter spells went awry and they won a crushing victory. A classic bait-and-switch strategy.”

“Wow.” Now that Zanoba had pointed it out, I had seen the right flank guy switch places with the rear guard guy outside of the enemy’s sightlines, then move to the left flank. The rear guard guy then met the enemy soldiers who pursued the right flank with magic... Only for the enemy to easily counter him with a spell. The subsequent attack sent him down.

They were fighting with real magic and swords, but they apparently had a similar setup of magic circles to the ones we used at University of Magic because his wounds healed right away. There must have been a rule where you were out if you were taken out, since he left right after that. After him another guy went down, then another, until in the end the general, surrounded by three enemies, surrendered.

“Guess they’re done,” I said. The team who’d taken down the general raised a victory cheer, and I heaved myself up, ready to go find Shagall.

“I believe there’s more to come,” Zanoba said. As I started walking, another team entered the ring. I looked over at Shagall, who showed no sign of moving, then down at the new lineup. They

appeared to be working in several teams. There was no tournament bracket listed anywhere, so I couldn't guess how many more rounds were coming. They might keep going all day. It looked likely at this point.

What to do? The idea of waiting around wasn't unpleasant, but I'd rather not waste time. Was there no way to wrangle myself an appointment? Randolph's letter of introduction hadn't gotten me any closer than if I'd shown up empty-handed.

I wasn't even sure if I was allowed to watch their drills. They could easily be a national secret or something. No one showed up to chase me out, so I assumed it was fine. But still.

"Hey, this seat taken?" said someone beside me. I looked around to find a man in his early forties with dark blond hair and patchy stubble. He had the air of someone who'd been a bit of a fop back in the day but was making an effort to show he'd pulled himself together. He seemed familiar, but I couldn't place from where. Orstepedia was packed with information, but it didn't have any pictures. I needed names to work out who anyone was. This guy was in the palace of the King Dragon Realm, so off the bat, I knew he was nobility or royalty—at minimum a knight. There was no way the royal family went roaming about without bodyguards, even within the palace, so...noble or knight. No sword, so probably a noble. No guards or attendants either, which meant he wasn't a very important one.

"Be my guest," I replied. "I don't own it." I decided to try talking to him for a bit rather than ask his name right away. If he *was* an important noble, he might get offended by my lack of recognition.

"I'll join you, then," said the man. He sat down, then looked out over the training grounds. "It's a good exercise, right?"

"Indeed. I admit I don't understand it very well."

“That’s the King Dragon Realm’s signature training methodology.”

“Surely all countries use mock battles?” I pointed out. Not to rain on his parade, but they had a similar routine in the Asura Kingdom. Theirs was a bit larger in scale and slightly more complex, but the commanding officers drilled the soldiers hard with chess-board style setups.

“You think so?” the man said.

“What, is there something you do differently to everyone else?”

“There is. Take that man who’s playing the general of the Western Army, for example. He’s the eldest son of a provincial noble. Under ordinary circumstances, a man of his rank couldn’t dream of rising to such a station, and if he did, it’d only be to defend his own lands with his own soldiers.”

“Huh. Yet here he’s playing the general.”

“They have all the officers try each assignment, taking turns.”

A player rotation—got it. It was the same philosophy as putting players into positions they didn’t normally play. That way they could get the hang of the fundamentals while also learning how to play the position efficiently. Made sense to me. Understanding how a position works in theory was pretty different from doing it for real.

“I see. That must allow for everyone to find out what role they’re best suited to.”

“Precisely,” he agreed.

“And not just that,” I went on, “you can use it to uncover talent, like him.” The Western army was dominating the Eastern army before our eyes. This eldest son of a provincial noble was a damn good commander. This was hardly my area of expertise, but I could tell his orders were precise and he left no slack. His fighting style was

steadfast and methodical—no surprise attacks or convoluted maneuvers.

“In fact, in this country, assignments aren’t based on social rank.”

“Oh?” Even provincial nobles had a shot at becoming a general for real? Going to the trouble of searching out great talent then not using it was a colossal waste of time, to be fair. It was common sense to use that talent. Unfortunately, a lot of feudal societies were lacking in that regard.

“I bet the Asura Kingdom doesn’t do that, eh?” the man prompted.

“I doubt it,” I agreed. “Though I’m hardly an expert.”

A little while back, Ariel had let me watch the Asuran army run through a practice maneuver. Luke sat beside me explaining this and that. It turned out that in the Asura Kingdom all assignments were determined by your rank in the nobility. A Boreas Greyrat, for example, would be placed in the front right of the commander’s division. The positions were based on the assignments drawn up by the commander in the Laplace War—they’d been passed down as-is ever since. As you’d expect, the formations they used reflected the values of that period, dragged unchanged into the present day. Visually impressive and flashy as they were, they lacked any practical value. This sad state of affairs had come about, Luke lamented, because the Kingdom of Asura hadn’t participated in any major clashes since the Laplace War.

Meanwhile, the King Dragon Realm could assign all its commanders to the roles that best suited them. Some commanders were best employed on the right wing, some charging the enemy flank. Other commanders fared best in a head-on confrontation, while others still knew how to use magicians to deploy magical

attacks with pinpoint timing. They understood where their strengths lay, which allowed them to feel satisfied in their roles.

It was true. That wouldn't fly back in the Asuran Kingdom. Luke told me that he wanted to improve things, but old traditions like that take a long time to change—no matter how old and unwieldy they might be, people will always push back with, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

"Are you here to study our training methodology?" the man asked.

There was a sharp gleam in his eyes. Like he was searching for something. Was *that* what this was about? Did he suspect me of being a spy? It was glaringly obvious that I wasn't from the King Dragon Realm, so I couldn't blame him. Plus I'd made a bunch of comparisons with Asura without thinking.

"No, my friend's nephew is from here," I replied, indicating Zanoba, who inclined his head.

"My name is Zanoba," he said.

"Oho, I should have said earlier!" the man exclaimed. "I am Vio Pompadour."

A Pompadour, huh? I've heard that name from Orsted.

The Pompadours were one of the noble houses of the King Dragon Realm, a distinguished line of warriors who even appeared in the *Epic of the North God*. They were also closely related to the royal family, if memory served. I was pretty sure the king's grandmother had been a Pompadour.

Whew, close one. He's basically royalty. Good thing I didn't say anything rude.

The other thing about the Pompadours was that their likelihood of becoming disciples of the Man-God was around C-rank—the lowest of the lowest of the middle.

“A lord of the house of Pompadour! Please excuse my ignorance.”

“Not at all,” he said, brushing me off. “What was your name, by the way?”

“My most sincere apologies. I am Rudeus Greyrat. I am employed as the representative of Orsted the Dragon God, second of the Seven Great Powers.”

“The Dragon God, eh! I’ve reeled in a big fish. And you, Sir Zanoba—are you also a follower of the Dragon God?” he asked, turning to Zanoba.

Zanoba nodded. “Indeed, though, I am, um, of little importance.”

“He’s only saying that. He’s very powerful.”

“Strength is all I have to offer, I’m afraid.”

I didn’t mean physical power, dumbass.

The Zanoba Store had grown a lot—there were branches all over the world now. And money is power, as they say. I wasn’t exaggerating.

“Two such esteemed individuals...” Vio said thoughtfully. “What brings you to the King Dragon Realm?”

“Um, well...” I began.

Hmmm. This is a tough situation to explain to someone who isn’t involved. This guy could totally be one of Li’l Pax’s would-be assassins. Better not reveal too much.

“His nephew, you know, was in a bit of a tight spot, so we came to help him out.”

“Is that so?”

“Then we got here and found there’s some political trouble going on, so we were wondering what we could do to pitch in. We

thought we should get a handle on current events, and to do that, we were told to come here and talk to General Shagall—”

“You have connections with General Shagall? This nephew of yours must be someone quite important,” Vio remarked.

“Oh, no, the general just has a lot of friends,” I replied. Generalissimo Shagall was known as one of the people who’d shaped the King Dragon Realm into the powerful nation it was today. According to Orsted, he’d gathered up talent from the ranks of those who’d fallen out of favor and used them to build prosperity and military dominance. This training methodology on display was likely his invention as well. He was a popular guy. Connections everywhere. His circle was so wide, no one knew the full extent of it—so when I claimed that Zanoba and I were acquainted with him, it shouldn’t have sounded too fishy.

“Unfortunately, General Shagall is very busy, so we’re taking the liberty of waiting for him here,” I explained.

“I see.” Vio looked pensive for a moment, but then looked up and nodded. “A friend’s nephew is no better than a stranger in the eyes of most. It is admirable of you to come to his aid.”

He hadn’t said as much in words, but the skeptical vibes I’d been getting from him abated and were replaced by a genial warmth. The friendliness was sudden...but maybe he was satisfied now that he’d worked out what the strangers were doing here.

“Though I should warn you: I think today General Shagall means to keep going with the drills until sundown.”

“You don’t say.” I looked up. The sun was due south, meaning there were probably around another five hours of drills to go.

“How about you talk to me?” Vio suggested. “I may not look it, but I’m fairly knowledgeable about my country’s affairs. There are things I can’t go into, of course, but I can tell you about our current situation if that’ll help.”

“Would that be all right?” I asked. We needed to know about the present state of the nation. It didn’t have to come from Shagall. And a member of the House of Pompadour *would* know a lot about that. I wanted to hear Shagall’s perspective as well, but sitting here for hours was a waste of time.

“Our meeting was kismet, I’m sure. Only, if we’re going to talk, this place is... Well, shall we go somewhere we can talk more freely?”

And so, off we went to hear what Vio had to tell us.

Vio was actually a disciple of the Man-God. Zanoba and I followed him, unsuspecting, right into the jaws of a trap. It was a dire situation...

No, nothing so exciting! He took us by carriage to a restaurant a little way away from the palace—a pretty swanky joint.

I tried to stay on my guard, but even I had to admit that it felt a bit too obvious to be a trap.

Vio talked a lot. Inside the carriage, he told us all about the sightseeing spots—stuff worth visiting near the palace. Then he moved on to the design of the distant palace, then the local legends about the street we were rolling along. He had the easy knowledge of a seasoned tour guide. I was impressed.

This continued through our meal, as he showcased his exhaustive knowledge of the cuisine. The restaurant we were at served traditional King Dragon Realm cooking, as prepared by an incredible chef. The recent fad in the King Dragon Realm was for cutting-edge culinary innovation, so he hadn’t secured a job as a palace cook, but he was the best option around if you wanted a traditional meal. The first dish is this, the second is that, blah blah...

Honestly, I wasn't enough of a gourmand to follow a lot of Vio's patter. Even so, his pride and love for every topic shone. I could see the intensity of his love for his country, his patriotism. Wasn't that great?

Nothing in his extended monologue related to what I needed. Alas.

"How did you find the King Dragon Realm's famed cooking?" he asked.

"It was very good. I didn't give it credit till now, I admit. Last time I came here, I wasn't too blown away by what I ate."

He laughed. "Not all chefs are of equal ability. You're always going to strike out sometimes."

This place, though? This place rocked. The King Dragon Realm's cuisine revolved around fruit and vegetables. It was simple, but undoubtedly nutritious. My impression of health-conscious food was that it was all a bit bland, but this had been outstanding. Goes to show you how good ingredients can be transformed in the hands of a good chef.

"Was there anything else you wanted to ask about?" Vio asked, satisfied he'd told us everything there was to know about his culture.

"Now that you ask... Could you, er, tell us about the political situation?"

"You want to know about politics?"

"Not national secrets or anything—random rumors and gossip would do."

"All right. Let's see... First of all, the King Dragon Realm is in a bit of turmoil at the moment. That started when the former king passed away."

Oof, straight in with a painful topic.

The old king had been a disciple of the Man-God. That was why Orsted killed him.

“Yes, I did hear about that. May he rest in peace,” I, follower of Orsted, said. I didn’t even blush.

“After that, one of the King Dragon Realm’s vassal states was invaded, not just by one nation, but three different countries that came together for the attack. It appeared to have been orchestrated in the conflict zone to the north. They aren’t powerful nations, but three at once makes for a thunderous headache. As a matter of course, the King Dragon Realm went to the aid of its vassal state...but you see, there’s something off about how those three countries are behaving in the aftermath.”

“Off in what way?”

“They won’t retreat. After our reinforcements and provisions arrived, they defeated the enemy in battle, then pushed them back to the border. But now they’re fighting back hard. There have been attempts to negotiate a peace behind the scenes, but they play deaf to every envoy we send.”

“Perhaps they think that if the invasion succeeds, they can get at least some territory out of it,” I suggested.

“Considering the discrepancy in their power compared to the King Dragon Realm, it should be obvious how impossible that is, even if we are preoccupied with our own problems, and yet...”

When you thought about it, even if these three countries did invade one of the King Dragon Realm’s vassal states and occupy a chunk of their domains, the King Dragon Realm, the real heavy hitter here, was hardly going to take that lying down. They’d join the war in earnest, and depending on the circumstances it was perfectly within their power to wipe out the invaders altogether.

“All three of these countries?” I asked.

“Yes, all three.”

Okay, that is odd.

If it were a simple case of striking at the King Dragon Realm while they were weakened, I'd get it. But why keep fighting this hard even after the King Dragon Realm got back on its feet? If this had been the outcome they wanted, they could have straight-up invaded any time without waiting for a gap in the King Dragon Realm's defenses. And three countries at once...

"Something smells off," I agreed.

"Exactly. There's also the possibility that if Shirone joins them seeking independence, they might conquer one of our vassal states."

"Right."

The biggest names amongst the King Dragon Realm's vassal states were the Kingdom of Shirone, the Sanakia Kingdom, and the Kikka Kingdom, but there were a number of other smaller nations too. Their domains were small and their national influence limited; they were the kind of countries that barely avoided being subsumed by other countries by dint of the King Dragon Realm's patronage. It was very possible such a country could be wiped out. If Shirone had added its forces to the attack while they were withstanding an assault from three other nations it'd be a serious bloodbath. I saw how some had ended up on the side of either killing Pax or handing him over to try and head off a potential invasion from Shirone.

"That aside..." Vio went on to tell us all sorts of things about the politics of the King Dragon Realm. A minister who'd had a daughter, then such-and-such noble's son who'd become allied with something-or-other faction through marriage. Most of it was everyday small talk, nothing that sounded like it could be related to Li'l Pax. There was always a chance I was wrong, however, so I planned to look into it all regardless.

"Gosh, look at the time," Vio exclaimed. I looked out the window to see that dusk had fallen.

“I’m afraid I have another engagement after this, so I’ll have to take my leave of you here,” he said.

“Thank you very much for your time today,” I replied.

“Not at all, the pleasure was mine. It’s not every day I get the chance to boast about my country. I greatly enjoyed myself,” Vio said, then he bid us farewell and left.

We went back to the training grounds, but Shagall had already gone home. Bad timing. Nothing I could do about it now, so we headed back to our lodgings. There, we met up with Eris and the others. The five of us crowded around the table and exchanged what we’d learnt.

“From what I hear, it seems like the Millis knight orders are throwing their weight around in these parts,” Aisha said.

She told us how a lot of knights from the holy knight orders were staying in town—soldier types in blue armor emblazoned with the Millis insignia, loitering all over the city. When Aisha asked around about them, she heard that they were known for their tyrannical behavior. They refused to pay for meals, got into fights with adventurers, and quarreled with the guilds. Yet for whatever reason there was a silent agreement between the knights and the guards of the King Dragon Realm that the guards wouldn’t intervene. This was causing tension with the citizens.

It scarcely needed to be said that if they were a significant presence, our chances of selling Ruijerd figurines here through The Zanoba Store were abysmal. Those knightly Order of Whatever types hated demons, after all. People were similarly dissatisfied about the rising prices of imported goods and increasing taxes.

“I found a building I think might work as a base of operations for the mercenary company,” Aisha went on. “What do you think? Am I good to go ahead with refurbishing it as an office?”

“For now, let’s get the teleportation circle and contact tablets set up. Standard procedure.”

I had a better picture of the problems plaguing the King Dragon Realm. Next, I’d report back to Orsted, then do some digging into what was behind it all. It didn’t sound like a Man-God plot, and this was a future that had been altered by my involvement, so I couldn’t rely on Orsted knowing anything about it...but hey, gotta keep the boss in the loop.

“How do you wish to proceed, Master?” Zanoba asked. “Should it come to it, I would happily take Lady Benedikte and the little prince and flee with them from this land.”

“No...no, I think we can probably work something out,” I said. I could handle the knights of Millis. And I had a little theory about what was going on with the three invading countries.

“You do? I submit to your judgment.”

Probably is the operative word, though, okay?

Chapter 4: The Naughtiest Kid

A FEW DAYS LATER I went to the Kingdom of Asura. When I asked Orsted about the situation in the King Dragon Realm, he'd coughed up the name of the culprit without batting an eye.

All according to my predictions. Although actually, I'd simply remembered a report that had come to Orsted about it. So. I went to the Asura Kingdom, alone, to settle things with the mastermind once and for all.

To get to them, I turned to Luke, who was a bit like the prime minister of the Asura Kingdom. Once I explained what was going on he gave me the location along with directions for how to get there. Connections do come in handy once in a while.

Okay, well, Luke was my cousin, so this was more like having a big brother I could ask to help me out. When I said so to Luke, he blushed a tiny bit.

Jeez, stop that. I'm sorry, but you know I'm into women...

The mastermind was in one of the most heavily guarded places in the Asura Kingdom, but with the travel permit Luke obtained for me, I was able to traipse across regions forbidden even to the highest ranking foreign dignitaries. The security was as heavy as I'd heard. I passed a whole host of checkpoints along the way, but eventually, I arrived at the mastermind's lair.

There I was, in the very heart of Asura's Palace...outside the queen's chambers.

In front of the ornately embellished door stood a huge man. He wore sparkly gold armor, and his battle-axe was planted on the floor before him. A doorkeeper. His whole deal just screamed "doorkeeper." He had to be about twice as broad as me, and that

wasn't fat. You could tell from the way he held himself that he was padded by a thick layer of muscle. The good kind, too. He was muscly on the inside, not just the outside. His core was ripped. People with ripped core muscles even stand differently. Eris was the same. Even the way they stand looks more solid.

Of my wives, by the way, the one with the weakest core is Roxy. That's why she's always falling over. But that's not important right now.

"Well, hello there!" I said. "Hope you don't mind if I just pop on in." I slipped past the big guy and was heading for the royal chambers, when...

Clomp, clomp.

He stomped over to plant himself in my way.

"Huh?" I tried to go right, and he moved right. I tried to go left, and he moved left. He had me totally blocked off. "So, um, do you think you could let me in?" I tried.

"No. No one tell me about you," he replied. I tried flashing him the permit—which was just the Asuran coat of arms, but he wasn't having it.

I mean okay, I didn't get an appointment, but come on.

Come to think of it, this doorkeeper hadn't been here when I'd come by not so long ago. Was he new? He had to be. I'd never seen him before, and he didn't know who I was. He was almost certainly a new hire. *Honestly, Arieluke, what are you even teaching your newbies?*

"Look, new guy," I tried again. "You'd better get out of the way or you're going to piss me off. I've got permission to be here, all right?"

"No. It night. Now, only Lord Luke, Lady Sylphie, or Lady Sylphie's husband go in."

What's that? You have taught him how to behave! Very impressive, very impressive. So the problem is just that he doesn't know what I look like.

"Is that right?" I said brightly. "I should have said—so sorry. I'm Sylphie's husband. My name is Rudeus Greyrat. You can go ahead and let me—"

"No. No proof."

Proof? Come on, how am I supposed to prove it?!

Would a photo of Sylphie and me being all smoochy do it? Except—too bad!—there aren't any photos in this world! Maybe if I brought Lucie, the physical manifestation of my and Sylphie's love...would that count? It was a moot point, since she was back at home. All I had in my pocket was the holy idol.

"Um, proof," I said. As I hesitated, the big guy pointed his battle-axe at me.

"You suspicious."

"Whoa, hold up," I babbled, "I'm sorry okay so just hold on for five seconds and let's stay calm and talk about this like gentlemen!" Hell, the blade on the thing was as big as my head. It looked like it weighed fifty kilos. He could just drop it, let gravity do the work, and squish me flat.

Well, right now, I had the Magic Armor on. I was fairly sure I wouldn't insta-die. Still, I didn't want to get in a fight if I could help it.

I'm Ariel's boss, and you're her lackey. There's no need for us to fight. Love and peace, man.

"I am doorkeeper. You do not pass."

"Hmmm..."

What was I supposed to do now? This guy's total lack of flexibility was getting to be a problem. If I went back to Luke's office and dragged him up here, he'd sort it out in a flash, but he'd looked

really busy... I casually attempted to evade Mr. Doorman, first left, then right, but he intercepted me easily. I could really feel his determination to bar my passage under absolutely any circumstances.

“Can I do whatever else I want so long as I don’t go past you?”

Mr. Doorkeeper looked a bit confused, but grunted in assent and said, “Yes.”

Sorry, dude, I am actually going in.

“Hey, Aaariel! Come and plaaay!” I yelled. Maybe I couldn’t get my body through, but my voice? I could squeeze that past him, no sweat. Did you ever see such ingenuity? You thought Odysseus was the trickster? Please. It’s *Rudeus* you’ve got to look out for!

Mr. Doorkeeper started, looking too confused to act. Not long after, the door opened. Out came a maid I knew well. Ariel’s lady-in-waiting. What was she called again? I remembered hearing she’d started at the same time as Lilia.

“Lord Rudeus, whatever is the matter?” she asked.

“I came to request an audience with Her Majesty Queen Ariel, but this gentleman is reluctant to let me in.”

The maid’s eyes narrowed in anger. “M-my apologies!” she stuttered, then turned to the doorkeeper. “Dohga! This gentleman is permitted! Let him through at once!” But the door guard shook his head.

“No. No one tell me. He has weapons. It night. Can’t do it.”

“Dohga, this is Sir Rudeus!” she tried again. “Come now, I know you were told you can let him through at any time.”

“No. No proof.”

“I’m *telling* you...” she said, exasperated, but I guess he didn’t trust the maid either yet.

This new guy—Dohga was his name, apparently—was a tough nut to crack. A kid like this was probably well suited to guarding the queen's room, though. He didn't seem like the type to be turned by gold or anything.

"Dohga," came a refined voice from behind the door. The kind of voice that charmed everyone who heard it. Dohga visibly jumped. "That gentleman is Sylphie's husband. You are to let him pass at any time."

Ariel sounded a little ticked off, which made Mr. Doorkeeper twitch again. He hurried away from the door, then went down on one knee, grunting deferentially.

Can I go through now? I'm going, okay? We good? Stepping gingerly on my tiptoes, never taking my eyes off the battle-axe, I crept into Ariel's chambers.

Ariel looked like she'd just gotten out of the bath. She'd changed into something casual, and a lady-in-waiting was combing her hair.

"Welcome, Lord Rudeus. I must say, it's rather indelicate to impose yourself upon an unmarried woman in the middle of the night like this, don't you think?"

"Um, true. Sorry about that. It was kind of urgent."

"Well, this is a matter between you and me, after all... Don't worry, I'll be sure to keep what commences between us a secret from Sylphie."

"Hey. There's no need for secrets; nothing's going to happen. And besides, I'm the one who reports back to Sylphie."

"Really? How disappointing," Ariel said. She came back to this joke from time to time. It was to check whether I'd cheat. Whether I'd betray Sylphie.

And what are you gonna do if I actually give into the temptation, huh? Speaking of temptation...maybe because she was just out of the bath, she smelled really good. I'd never felt that way about Ariel before. She always presented herself so flawlessly, but something about her now seemed more human—that must have been it.

Agh, don't even think about it! Damnit, Goddess, give me strength!

I took a big whiff of the idol to try and clear my head. Apparently, my vow of chastity had left me with some pent-up energy.

"I see you are a man of taste, Sir Rudeus," Ariel remarked.

"This isn't taste, it's my faith. Now, could we maybe clear the others out of here? Um, not that I'm going to do anything. I just don't want people to see."

Ariel didn't respond. She merely clapped her hands and said, "You may go," dismissing the maid.

It felt a bit like I'd pushed away the ladder to safety. But now we could talk, at least.

"Okay. So, Ariel..."

"Yes."

"The one behind it all...is you. Right?"

"Yes. That's correct... Though, you'll have to be more specific. You could be talking about a lot of things."

Um... Well, okay. I guess Ariel is queen.

Working for the good of your country probably meant getting your hands dirty.

"Do you happen to have proof that I am guilty of whatever it is you claim?" Ariel inquired.

"There's no point playing dumb! I've already got all the evidence I need!" I cried, getting into character.

Right away, the door banged open. I whirled around and saw Dohga standing there, battle-axe in hand. He walked into the room then made a beeline for me, raising his axe...

Whoa whoa whoa, j-just, just hold up a second...!

"Stand down, please, Dohga," Ariel said.

"But Your Majesty. He threatened you."

"No one is threatening me. It was a joke."

Dohga gave a reluctant grunt.

"Don't come in again unless you hear me scream," Ariel finished. Dohga grunted again, then trudged back to the entrance. He looked downtrodden after being told off.

It was kind of cute.

"My apologies," Ariel said when he was gone. "He's very rigid..."

"I got a little carried away with the bit."

"Personally, I like it when you joke around. The palace doesn't keep a fool."

Har har. All righty, I'll train up a clown and bring them along next time. Someone who's good for protection, not just laughs. The kind of guy who'll drag your enemies into the sewers and dispose of them.

"What *were* you talking about?" Ariel asked, sitting up straight. It looked like she was taking this seriously.

"The three countries invading the King Dragon Realm's vassal state."

"Okay. What about them?" She spoke like it was so obvious that she didn't have to say it outright.

But then, it was.

I'd checked with Orsted, and confirmed that the three countries invading the King Dragon Realm's vassal state were being supported

behind the scenes by none other than the Asuran Kingdom. Or rather, Orsted had received a report to that effect. It basically said, *Hey, I want to use these three countries to invade this vassal state of the King Dragon Realm. That cool? I'd read it myself.*

Only, the Asuran Kingdom wasn't interested in conquering the vassal state, or expanding its territory. That wasn't what this was about. The point was to wear down the King Dragon Realm—pure harassment, plain and simple. Also, the reason consumer prices were rising in the King Dragon Realm was thanks to the Asuran Kingdom ever so slightly increasing its tax on imports and traded goods.

"Would you mind stopping the invasion?" I asked. "It'd help me with some negotiations with the King Dragon Realm."

"Of course," Ariel replied.

She picked up a pen and scribbled something on a piece of paper in front of her. Then she took what had to be the royal seal, stamped and folded the paper, sealed it, and then finally handed it to me.

"Give this to Luke, and it should end the invasion a few days later. Use it whenever you feel like it."

"Hahah!" I crowed, taking it with gratitude.

I had a bargaining chip now. Friendship is important, but so is power.

"Oh, right. The other thing was, I wondered if you'd let me use the Asuran embassy in the King Dragon Realm? Predictably, it turns out people don't respect the 'Right Hand of the Dragon God.'"

"Permission granted. I'll see that it's arranged," Ariel said.

She clapped her hands again and the lady-in-waiting from earlier came in. Ariel whispered something, and the other woman nodded before leaving again.

“The embassy has everything on hand, but please let the ambassador know if you need anything.”

“Thank you for all of this.”

“Not at all,” Ariel said, looking at me doe-eyed. It was sexy. I didn’t like it.

“Is this why you raised me to this position?” she asked.

“No—I mean, that’s what Sir Orsted wanted, but I just wanted to make Sylphie happy.”

“Heh heh. I ought to thank Sylphie, then.”

“Hahaha. We’re both going to be indebted to Sylphie forever, aren’t we?”

We chuckled some more together. Heh heh, ahahaha. It was fun talking to Ariel like we were plotting something dastardly. I mean, we could basically do *anything*.

“I’m sorry about Dohga before, by the way,” she said.

“Oh, Mr. Doorkeeper?”

“He’s a very reliable doorkeeper, but he is a little inflexible.”

I had to wonder what “reliable” here meant for a doorkeeper, but a big hulk like that did seem like the ideal choice to stand guard at an entrance. It was that or be a baseball catcher. With a body like that, he was sure to make a first-rate batter too.

“Forgive him this time. I’ll make sure he’s more careful in future.”

“Not at all, I can’t fault a young person who’s dedicated to his job. Please don’t fire him or anything for this.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

I didn’t know if he was young inside that armor, but no reason to split hairs.

“Right, then. It wouldn’t be proper to linger in the bedroom of an unmarried woman, so I’ll be on my way.”

“Goodness, surely you wouldn’t appear without warning in a lady’s room, make demands of her, and then simply wander off?”

“I’m a perfect gentleman,” I said indignantly. “Sylphie doesn’t have to be ashamed of her husband.”

“You could at least give me the rundown of the situation,” Ariel said pointedly.

“Oh. Right.”

I’d sent her the news of what happened in Millis via contact tablet, but some things were better said in person, as I’d written myself. Anyway, I gave her the rundown on what happened in Millis and what I’d been doing since then.

“...In conclusion, it looks like I’m going to have to fight Geese. I’m gathering my forces now.”

“I see...” Ariel said. “I’m presently gathering my own forces as well. When the time comes, I’d be happy to lend them to you.”

“What are you gathering forces for?” I asked.

“I could be murdered in my bed at any time, so I’m building a private army. I’m sure as far as Sir Orsted is concerned, the stronger his allies are, the better?”

“No arguments there,” I agreed.

Huh... She’s really good at this.

Ever since Ariel became queen, she’d taken to her duties like a fish to water. She didn’t need anyone to tell her what to do; she knew what she wanted, and she was always moving towards it. And her strides were a lot longer than mine.

Becoming queen wasn’t the final goal for her. There was plenty left on her bucket list. She wouldn’t run out of goals until the day she died, nor stop striving to achieve them.

Man. I could probably learn something from that. I wonder if I could borrow her boots for a bit and try to walk a few miles in them.

I wasn't going to ask, though. If I did, she'd hand them over way too eagerly—I bet she'd toss in her stockings for free.

"Y'know, you're a bit scary, Ariel."

"Oh, dear. Truly?"

"I feel if you ever saw me at my weakest, you'd betray us."

"You wound me. After all that I owe you, the very idea...! If you're worried, though, I could tell you one of my weaknesses?"

"What? No! There's no need to go that far. I was just reminded that you're always on the hunt for an advantage, that's all."

"I'm also a woman who acts on her feelings," Ariel said, pouting. Then, as though something had occurred to her, she pressed a finger to her lips. "But there's an entertaining thought."

"What?"

"Well, if I had a child I could name it Rudeus Junior. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"Wha—?! Please don't."

Nothing could be more suspicious! I imagined Sylphie looking at me, her eyes cold, and Luke with shocked disbelief all over his face. If she said anything outright, I could brush it off as a joke, but quietly naming a *child* after me was basically declaring that the kid was mine. It wouldn't matter how much I insisted that Ariel and I weren't involved. Everyone would draw their own mistaken conclusions.

That's not funny at all. That's an epic betrayal! Not of Orsted, but of me and Sylphie.

"Um, actually, I was talking about betraying Sir Orsted. Not just me."

“You know, I was there when the Water God Reida was killed. Do you really think I could betray you after that terrifying experience?”

The death of Water God Reida... She was right. That had been terrifying.

Reida was overwhelmingly powerful. We’d been pinned down—even Perugius. Then Orsted showed up in the ballroom, fended off all her attacks, and knocked her out with a single knife-hand strike. He didn’t do it that way because it favored his strength, or because it was the technique he knew best. He killed her that way because it was convenient. If I were a figure of note, the thought of meeting a similar fate would make my blood run cold. Death could come at any moment, no matter who tried to protect you... Like a horror movie, right?

“I don’t genuinely think you’ll betray us,” I reassured Ariel. “Just in case though, watch out for anyone who shows up saying they received advice in a dream.”

“I will. But you needn’t be concerned about me. I’ve really come to appreciate just how much this throne is worth.”

“Doesn’t that mean I should worry if it looks like you might lose it?”

“I’m offering my favors to the servant of the big scary Dragon God for that very reason.”

“We’ll gladly take whatever you’ve got.”

She chuckled. “I’m counting on you to help me cling pathetically to my throne, should it come to that. Okay?”

I suppose I could lend a hand.

Although, according to Orsted, Ariel’s regime would last until Ariel herself died.

“Speaking of clinging,” I said, “the other day, Roxy’s daughter Lala was...” We chatted about everyday stuff for another hour or so, then with that, I left the queen’s chambers.

I stepped out to find myself face to face with several knights. Dohga, plus three others. They were standing there as if they’d been waiting for me. It spooked me a bit, frankly. I thought I was about to be dragged off into the bowels of the castle and shaken down. They all looked seriously intimidating.

The scariest-looking one was someone I knew though, which changed everything.

“Been a while, Ghislaine,” I said.

“Yeah,” she replied, nodding solemnly like she always did, but I could tell from the way her tail was wagging that she was pleased to see me again. She wore golden armor, but unlike the full-body plating of the two men standing beside her, her light armor only covered the most crucial spots—the bare minimum. Let me be honest here—it looked badass. The gold of the armor complemented her brown skin beautifully, and she looked tough as hell. She was giving major S-tier character vibes.

Bet Paul would have laughed his head off at how dumb she looks, though.

“Sorry, guess I kept you waiting. I’ll be on my way...” I tried to leave, but she grabbed my hair.

“Wait.”

“Was there something you needed?”

“Is Eris well?”

“Can you imagine her otherwise?”

“No.”

“Yes, she’s doing great. Same as always.”

“Good...”

We had lots to catch up on, but Ghislaine was on duty right now. I mean, she was here outside the queen's chambers in the middle of the night all decked out in that sparkly armor. It had to be some emergency. Better not to get in their way.

"As much as I'd like to catch up, I gotta get going. I'm sure you're busy too—"

"No, um, wait," she mumbled.

What's that? Mind speaking a bit clearer?

"Luke told me that you'd be here."

"Oh, you've got business with me? What is it?"

You know I'll do anything you ask, Ghislaine. Well, depending. I'm a bit busy with other stuff right now. It might have to wait till later if it's super involved.

"Nothing serious. He said he wanted to see you."

Who said? I wondered. Then I looked at the two guys beside her. They both looked like totally ordinary middle-aged men. One was on the short side, his blond hair flecked with white. The other, unusually, had black hair. I placed both of them somewhere in their late forties, perhaps as old as fifty, and they carried themselves with the dignified air of seasoned warriors. The blond one stepped forward.

"'Tis an honor to meet you. My name is Sylvester Ifrit. I defend this castle as captain of the palace guard, and I place myself at your service."

"I'm Rudeus Greyrat, a friend of the queen, through Her Majesty's beneficence. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

If he was captain of the palace guard, that made him the most important knight in the whole of the Kingdom of Asura. That explained the shiny gold armor. Except, wait, everyone here was wearing the same armor.

"You are too modest; I hear you are an old friend of Her Majesty's," said Sylvester.

"In truth, it's my wife who's the old friend."

"Lady Sylphiette, I believe. Such ethereal and delicate beauty, combined with unyielding strength."

"Just so. You know her well."

A+ description, no notes.

"Anyway, it's all thanks to my wife that I'm able to impose upon Her Majesty."

"You may claim as much, but I am told you played a leading role in deciding the struggle for the throne..."

Struggle for the throne. That made it sound like there'd been a fair fight between all the different castles and we'd come out on top.

"Aw, y'know... I mean, I was only acting on my boss's orders. The one who really ought to get the credit is my master, the Dragon God Orsted."

"I see you are loyal as well."

Can you call this loyalty? Doubt it, to be honest.

Whatever. Hopefully, through little things like this, I could grow Orsted's authority.

"Had it not been for you, I would never have been promoted this far," Sylvester went on.

"Yeah?"

"At the end of the day, I'm the son of poor, middling-rank nobles and nothing more. Thanks to this position, however, I've been able to put even my youngest son through school."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. When I heard "captain of the royal guard," I'd assumed he was from one of Asura's most important

noble families. Apparently not. Ariel believed in meritocracy and had been elevating talent. This guy had to be one of her hires.

...Hold on a second, if this guy's captain of the royal guard, how incredible must he be? He might be a useful friend to make.

"Uh, feel free to call me if you need any advice with your son," I said.

"Sorry?" he said, confused, but then brightened. "Oh! Hahaha. You're just as funny as they said. No fear there. My boy's talented, just like his father."

"Talented people still have their own worries and run into trouble."

"True," he agreed. "I'll bear that in mind."

With that, I turned to the next guy who was decked out in his own set of gold armor. Sylvester, Ghislaine, Dohga, and this guy—with all of them sparkling away it made the room seem weirdly bright.

"And, uh, you are?" I asked.

The black-haired man met my eyes, then let out a "hah!" of laughter. I laughed too. I'm a firm believer in a smile as the first step to good communication. Smiles will save the world.

"It's an honor to meet you. My name is Rudeus Greyrat."

The man stared hard at me. He ran his eyes all the way from the top of my head down to the tip of my toes. He walked around to look at me from behind too. He had the air of someone sizing up a rare animal; it felt startlingly familiar. That's right, he reminded me of Kishirika. Which meant this guy probably had a demon eye.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing, nothing. It's very rare that I get a look at a servant of the esteemed Dragon God, that is all."

"It's true that there aren't all that many of us."

"I imagine so." He talked like someone who'd met Orsted before.

"Uh, by the way, your name was...?"

"Oh, how rude of me," he said. "I am..." Then he froze, and clamped his mouth shut. He let out another brisk bark of laughter and shot me a sidelong glance. "I'm afraid it's not yet time for you to know my name," he said abruptly. Unlike before, his voice was now unnecessarily dramatic. "You shall know it when the time is right. My name, my identity..."

With that, the black-haired, middle-aged man turned and strode away. There was even something about how he walked that looked like amateur theatrics.

"What's his deal?" I asked Ghislaine.

She looked troubled. "It was his idea. He wanted to meet you."

Uh, seriously, what was his problem? Did he never grow out of his edgy teen phase?

"Damnit, Chandle," she muttered after her departed colleague. "Rudeus is my old teacher, you tool."

His name was Chandle, got it. As it happened, Sir Sylvester confirmed immediately that the black-haired man's name was Chandle von Grandeur, and he was captain of Asura's Golden Knights.

I really had no idea what his deal was. Still... Hah. I had a funny feeling I'd run into him again.

I guess we'll make our first introductions the second time we meet. The line probably would have been funny if I'd thought of it at the time, but I settled for thinking it to myself.

Chapter 5: The King of the King Dragon Realm

SOMETHING I'D LEARNED over the past few years was that even among equals you still have to demonstrate your authority. When dealing with a big organization, you had to show them you can hang or they'd walk all over you. When in Rome, do as the Romans do... This situation was a bit different, sure, but it was important to do the appropriate prep so that you could keep up.

So here we were at the Asuran Embassy in Wyvern, capital of the King Dragon Realm. Ariel was a major shareholder in our corporation, and no matter where we were advertising the fact that we were backed by the Asura Kingdom brought clout. Borrowed authority and all that.

In reality, Orsted was the one backing the Asura Kingdom, not the other way around. Both were backing me, though, so either way it worked out. In any case, this time we were negotiating directly with the King Dragon Realm government. If it were just me, I'd get my butt kicked to the curb, but by borrowing like crazy from the Asuran Kingdom's authority I thought we might avoid another Millis.

That was my motivation for borrowing clothes and a carriage and everything else I could think of from the embassy, holding tight to the letter with Ariel's seal on it.

At the moment, though, I was sitting in silence, twiddling my thumbs and checking out the interior of this room at the embassy. *Someone* was taking forever to get changed.

"Aisha, you can take anything you like back with you, so hurry up. Eris is waiting."

"Hmmm... But Big Brother, I can't decide. Do you think green is best, after all? Eris is wearing red, and you're in gray..." Aisha had been wandering around in her undies trying to choose her outfit for

some time. I'd usually avert my eyes while a woman got dressed, but Aisha had said, "Big Brother, I want you to choose," and so, while enduring the glares of the other maids, I was here watching Aisha get changed in the flesh.

The thing was, despite saying she wanted me to choose, Aisha had no intention of giving me the last word on the matter. When I said, "Okay, that one," she shot back, "No, it's too much like Eris's," and went to look at something else. As the maid outfit had caused a bit of a problem last time, I was all for her wearing something more proper... But she was getting way too into it.

We went through three flouncy, floofy dresses. No one around me put much effort into getting ready, so this was a welcome novelty at first. It was wearing thin at this point.

"But then, I'm not in a leading role, so maybe plainer is better?" she mused.

"You can be showy if you like. In fact, yeah. Let's blow the minds of the King Dragon Realm big shots with your unparalleled cuteness."

"Oh, be serious!" she yelled back.

Now she was mad at me. If we were being serious though, given how few men Aisha got to spend time around, she might as well dress up fancy and try to get some attention here. Step out in a super cute outfit, chat up the noble boys at the palace, grab that trophy wife bag! Or whatever. We'd have to have a talk if she brought home someone too weird... But as Aisha herself said, she didn't really have any real work to do here. And besides, she was free to love whoever she liked.

"Okay, wear the dark-green one. That way you won't match Eris, plus it's not too showy. How's that?" I suggested.

"I guess," Aisha said. "But, like, the skirt's so short! You can see my legs."

What's wrong with that? Hell, show them off. If you've got it, flaunt it, I thought. But the maids around us were making faces that told me this was a no-go, so I could only assume legs were indeed a little risqué.

"Ugh," Aisha grumbled, then returned to rifling through gowns.

Standing there in her underwear, I was getting a front-row seat at how much she'd grown. She'd filled out in all the right places. Hotness seemed to run in our family, and Aisha was no exception. It was the kind of hotness that brought the creeps calling.

Paul's family, the Notos Greyrats, had a thing for big breasts—see Zenith and Lilia. I bet my grandma had giant knockers too. Must be in our genes.

My daughters would probably turn out the same. I couldn't picture Future Lucie with her breasts bouncing around... But if Eris had a daughter, she'd be a knockout for sure.

"Hey, Big Brother?" Aisha said.

"Huh?"

"Well?" she said huskily.

I realized she was standing with her hips thrust to one side, her hands on the back of her head to show her sides. I'd seen that pose somewhere before.

"Who taught you that?" I asked.

"Pursena. She said it's got a perfect hit rate."

"She's lying. She's never scored with that pose... I wouldn't trust her advice."

"No way!" Aisha replied. "She's so popular in the mercenary company, though..."

"Hey, we're not here to hang out!" I said. "Hurry up and choose."

I was trying to move her along, but we had plenty of time. The King Dragon Realm was unexpectedly relaxed about punctuality, so no one would make a fuss if we were a bit late. Great country, right? But my personal motto was to not leave things to the last minute. Still, it was important to always have a bit of wiggle room so you could go through life with time and peace of mind to spare.

Unfortunately, some people wanted to get everything done as fast as possible.

“Hurry up!”

Eris threw the door open with a bang and barged in. She wore a luxurious red jacket with black pants, the formal dress of the King Dragon Realm nobility, and had her hair pulled back in a ponytail. It really suited her. She was every inch the gallant swordswoman.

Actually, though, she was wearing the men’s version of formal dress. According to the maids, she couldn’t wear a sword with any of the gowns they had at the embassy, so that made her decision for her.

“How are you still trying stuff on?!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, hi Eris,” Aisha said. *“Sorry, there’s just so many options...”*

Eris huffed. Her bright red hair swishing behind her, she strode up to Aisha, then grabbed one of the gowns hanging around her. It was a wine red dress.

“Put this on, now!”

“But Eris, then we’ll match...” Aisha whined.

“What, you don’t want to look like me?”

*“It’s not that. It’s just, like, I’m supposed to be in the background. It’s no good if *you* don’t stand out.”*

“Not today! You’re my little sister, so you’d better wear something that doesn’t embarrass me!”

Aisha went a bit pink. Then, with a sheepish laugh, she took the dress from Eris.

“Well, when you say it like that, Eris, I guess I’ll take this one.” She looked more than a little pleased. Maybe she was happy Eris had called her “little sister”. The mind of a teenage girl was a mystery to me, but what was important was that she was happy.



With that, we had a dress for Aisha, so we set off for the palace.

I arrived at the castle then went to the audience chamber of the King Dragon Realm. I don't mean to sound pretentious, but I've developed some strong opinions about audience chambers. I've seen a lot in my time—the Asura Kingdom, the Kingdom of Shirone, Kishirika's castle... Audience chambers are a chance to flaunt your wealth. A wide open room, gorgeously furnished, sometimes with a guard dressed up in swanky armor... It's a great way to show off to any outsiders who step foot inside just how powerful you are, how amazing your country is, how important your king is. That's what audience chambers are about.

The Kingdom of Asura did a spectacular job on size and luxuriance. Its audience chamber was spacious and full of people. Simply dazzling. When I first checked it out, it was decked out more heavily than usual for Ariel's coronation, but everything—the scale, the staff, the expense, the throne, the beauty of the one sitting on it—was top-class.

But let me be blunt about it. The Asuran audience chamber was amazing, no doubt about it. But it came in hot at a global number two. The audience chamber I ranked as number one didn't stop at the audience chamber itself, but extended its grandeur to the route you took to get there. Starting outside the castle, visitors were charmed by elegant gardens and well-curated artworks. As you approached the chamber, you never ran into anyone else. As you passed down that corridor, soaking up the majesty around you, you couldn't help but feel your nerves jangle. Then, when you finally reached the towering door to the audience chamber, the anticipation was overwhelming. Your imagination ran wild with

expectation for what could possibly be behind those doors. Then, they opened. You couldn't call the room that came into view luxurious, even if you were trying to be nice. The furnishings were all stripped-down simplicity. Twelve knights were lined up in front of the throne, all of them wearing masks that lent them an air of mystery and intimidation. Even they seemed somehow unremarkable.

There was a reason for this. The layout was designed to further focus attention on the throne. On the throne there sat a man, the only one not wearing a mask. All who made it there were rendered speechless by his breathtaking delicacy, refinement, and sheer presence. They praised his magnificence to the heavens.

Where was this audience chamber, then? It was no secret—that was the audience chamber of Chaos Breaker, the floating fortress. The abode of Armored Dragon King Perugius. The opinion crept up on me, but I'm not exaggerating when I say that Perugius has the best taste in the world.

A sigh of incredulity slipped out of me as I looked upon the audience chamber of the King Dragon Realm. It was of a different breed to Asura's palace and Chaos Breaker. In a word it was sloppy. First of all, the entrance was flanked by two huge sets of armor like door guards. They had to be about three meters tall. These suits of armor, easily as huge as the Magic Armor, glared down at all who entered the audience chamber like guardian statues at a temple. There were no giant races in this world—well, it was possible that there was some tall race somewhere that I didn't know about, but no one residing in the King Dragon Realm would fit this armor. Which meant that it existed only to scare and overawe visitors. When you entered the audience chamber the first thing you saw was, you guessed it, the armor. From the doors almost all the way to the throne, empty suits of armor stood around the edge of the chamber. Fencing the gold-threaded carpet that ran up to the throne to

protect the king—wow! More armor. This time occupied. The throne they guarded was dull gray steel, like they'd repurposed a suit of armor into a chair. A cushion was affixed to it with rivets. It looked extremely uncomfortable. Aside from this, there were practically no other furnishings. There were some bits and pieces with the marks of allied nations and crests of knight orders, but that was it. Silver armor and rough stone walls. It was like someone had thrown a bunch of stuff together because it looked tough, then called it a day. Even so, the sense of being watched by all those helmets was fairly intimidating.

...It won't be for everyone, so I'm giving it four stars.

There was one other reason I downrated it, though...

"His Highness, the first prince of the King Dragon Realm, Kirkland von Kingdragon!"

Yep, the guy sitting on the throne wasn't the king, but a guy about my age. A young guy with blond hair and a wispy beard.

I'd done my research. Kirkland von Kingdragon: the current first prince of the Kingdragon Kingdom. He would one day be king. He was extremely intelligent and politically astute. When the king was absent, he handled affairs of state in his father's stead.

Still, when I dropped the name of the Asuran Kingdom, I'd requested an audience with the actual king. It was possible they didn't respect me enough; they may have dismissed me as an interloper. Just an unaligned nobody, so they could get away without sending the king himself.

I knelt, then kept my head down and waited for what he'd say next.

"Rise, and state your name," he said.

"It is an honor to meet you, your Highness. I am Rudeus Greyrat, follower of the Dragon God Orsted. I trust I find you well."

“Oho.” He sounded interested. “Were you not the one who vanquished the Water God Reida, then alone turned back the hordes that threatened Shirone, Rudeus Greyrat?”

The rumors of my exploits had been embellished yet again. They’d start saying I sparkled like a Christmas tree at this rate.

“Actually,” I replied, “Water God Reida was my master. And I wasn’t alone against that army. My companions and I fought alongside the soldiers of Fort Karon to stop them.”

“An honest man to boot. Surely you do not dispute, however, that you were involved in the deaths of both Water God Reida and North Emperor Auber.”

“I don’t deny it, your Highness.”

“In the King Dragon Realm, we place ability above rank and status. We value those who achieve great things—such as you, for instance—though they may lack social standing.”

“I appreciate you saying so,” I said.

Huh, after I thought they were being disrespectful, he seems surprisingly well-disposed towards me. But no, I should chalk that one up to mentioning the Asuran Kingdom.

“First, I must apologize,” the prince continued. “My father, His Majesty King Stelvio von Kingdragon, thirty-third ruler of the King Dragon Realm, has taken ill. Thus, I am here leading in his stead.”

“Please, think nothing of it, Your Highness.”

Oh he’s sick, you say! Well then, there’s no helping that. All good.

“Now, I was told you have something to say that will be worth my while. I don’t often get to hear from people like you... Or to rephrase, I have never known a man like you to come to me without some purpose.”

“Yes, your Highness, I—” I began, but he held up a hand to cut me off.

“Wait, don’t say it. Let me guess.”

He stroked his chin, regarding me with genuine interest. He came across as a cerebral fellow with self-confidence to spare. Like a man assured of his own considerable ability and that he could see it in others too. Well, he wasn’t wrong. Over the next few decades, he would build up the King Dragon Realm into a nation to match and even rival the Asura Kingdom. His political acumen outmatched even Ariel’s, to be blunt. He, along with the retainers he surrounded himself with, were all exceptional.

Unfortunately, there was also sadness waiting in his future—the sadness of a broken heart.

Kirkland von Kingdragon was in love. When he attended the coronation in the Asura Kingdom as ambassador, he’d been smitten with Ariel at first sight. He would have many more chances to visit the kingdom, but at the age of about twenty-five he would confess his love and she’d flat-out reject him. He hadn’t been turned down yet, however. So as of now, he’d be advocating for friendship with the Asura Kingdom. For sure.

“You’re not looking for an appointment, that much is for sure. I believe you’re close to Queen Ariel of Asura, so if that was what you wanted you’d be better served going there. She would be amenable to giving more than a mere government appointment. I daresay she’d grant you a title. How am I doing?”

“All true, Your Highness.”

He stared at me even more intently. Then, with a grin, he went on.

“What could bring a man such as yourself to our door, seeking favor? Well now, there’s a thought. There has been a strange rumor on the streets of late... Remind me of it, Shagall!”

At this, one of the knights at the prince's side looked up. He had the face of a small-time crook and wore the same armor as Randolph.

"Rumor has it that Rudeus Greyrat is appealing to the rulers of all the different lands in preparation for the resurrection of Laplace some eighty years hence," said Generalissimo Shagall Gargantis. I'd been told he was a quarter elf and spoke rough, but this guy's ears were rounded, and he spoke like a noble at court. Maybe because he was addressing royalty.

"Ah, that was it," said the prince. The pope in Millis had known all that too. You really couldn't underestimate these powerful nations and their information networks.

"And as part of your appeals, you are placing branches of your own organization in each of those countries, then using them to do business... Am I wrong?"

"You are not, your Highness."

You're not wrong...but I sense we're about to get a bit off track.

"And thus," he continued, "you have come to the King Dragon Realm, as you went to those other nations, to request our cooperation and permission for your business activities... Is that right?" The prince wore a smug grin of satisfaction.

I mean, yeah, okay. If not for Geese, that was going to be my plan. Only this time, things are a little different... But he's so pleased with himself. If I contradict him he might get grumpy. Not that part of me doesn't want to...

"You came all the way here to seek permission for something you could just as easily do without my leave. I admire that attitude," he said. The prince was in high spirits.

None of this was especially surprising to me. Randolph and Shagall were old friends, and my business could easily have come up in conversation.

“However, if I were to immediately grant your request, it would reflect poorly upon the dignity of my country. We cannot have a senseless mob banging at our door because they think the royal family will grant anything asked of us.”

I didn’t reply.

“As such, I impose a condition upon—what is it?” the prince said, looking suspiciously at my raised hand. We were getting off track. I had to do something.

“Excuse the interruption, your Highness,” I apologized. “Everything you said is true, but today, I’m here for a slightly different reason.”

The prince stopped. “...Oh,” he said.

First, let’s explain why I’m here.

“It’s about Lady Benedikte’s child,” I said, then watched the expression on the prince’s face change along with his demeanor. “My friend Randolph tells me that Lady Benedikte’s child...that Lord Pax II is regarded as an unwanted annoyance, and that there are some who seek to do away with him.”

“What of it?” the prince replied haughtily, without a hint of remorse. “With his mother being what she is, he is of no political use. Why should the King Dragon Realm support the life of one who will only encumber us?”

“What about Lord Randolph? If the child is killed, he won’t stay here.”

“The King Dragon Realm is not so feeble that I can be swayed by the strength of one man.”

No doubt. If you were, there wouldn't be any talk of murdering Li'l Pax.

"You've come before me today, then," he said, "to ask that I spare the child's life?"

I looked into the prince's eyes. "No. I wasn't thinking of sparing him. It was more like...if you have no use for him, would you give him to me?"

"Pfft." The prince snorted with laughter, then looked at Shagall. "Did you hear that, Shagall?"

"I did, Your Highness, with these very ears," the general replied. The prince stamped his foot, then leaned forwards to glare at me, resting his elbows on his knees. His attitude had changed yet again. Was I seeing his true colors now?

"Tell me this then, Rudeus Greyrat," he said. "How would that proposal serve the King Dragon Realm?"

Don't panic. Don't freak out. Perugius has way more majesty than this guy.

"Allow me to explain," I began.

The government of the King Dragon Realm is in the hands of the Orsted Corporation.

"First, I'm told that, ever since the death of the former king, a vassal state of the King Dragon Realm has been under assault by three other nations from the conflict zone to the north."

The prince didn't reply, so I went on.

"These vassal states may be under your dominion, but they are still your vassals, and thus you have to support them. The King Dragon Realm was badly affected by this war breaking out in the middle of your domestic unrest, and I expect that you are stretched thin trying to respond."

"What...is your point?" the prince asked.

“I can put an end to all that.”

Because Ariel's the one who's driving that war. She'd gone and riled up countries that had long hated the King Dragon Realm, and now she was selling them weapons. Not only that, but she was also looking over their shoulders and applying enough pressure to make sure they kept the war going. The Asura Kingdom had deep coffers—I'd relied on them myself many a time. But that gold didn't grow on trees. They played dirty when necessary. The Kingdom of Asura didn't regard this any more seriously than light harassment, so all I had to do was ask to cut it off at the source.

“One more thing, Your Highness. When the former king died, you took out a loan from the Millis Church because you were in urgent need of cash, correct?”

The prince looked at me.

“Even though you paid off the loan, you still allow their knightly orders to sojourn here to this day. Their high-handed evangelizing is causing a bit of upset, from what I hear.”

“What, you can put a stop to that too?” the prince asked.

“I can.” If he'd still been in debt my hands would've been tied, but it was paid off. The knights' behavior was little more than Millis's own way of harassing the King Dragon Realm. All I had to do was put in a word with the Blessed Child, or the pope, and then the knight orders should return to their own country right away. I'd owe the pope a favor, but that wasn't a problem. Times like these were why I maintained that connection.

“In addition, if, in the future, any difficulties arise between Lord Pax II and the Kingdom of Shirone, I will take full responsibility for it,” I added. If it came to that, I'd bring along Zanoba. Zanoba, Randolph and I would make for quite a trio. It'd turn into the Battle to Avenge Pax in no time.

“What say you, Your Highness?” I’d put forward three proposals so far. That should be plenty to persuade him of the benefit of letting the nuisance child live.

“What’s in this for you?” he replied.

“I can’t reveal their name, but someone in Sir Orsted’s inner circle cares deeply about Lady Benedikte and Lord Pax II. I intend to use this as a bargaining chip with him. Those of us who serve the Dragon God are all one under Sir Orsted, but strengthening such friendships is nevertheless important.”

I wasn’t lying. I was just adding an air of gravitas to telling him I wanted to help Benedikte and Pax II for Zanoba.

But the prince didn’t look satisfied, and he didn’t reply.

That’s one scary glare he’s giving me. Was there something I forgot to say?

“I think it’s a good offer,” said Shagall, throwing me a lifeline.

“Sir Rudeus has the ear of both the Asura Kingdom and the Holy Country of Millis. We can therefore assume he is trustworthy. Our own plans to deal with the issues he raises are already in place, so the benefit of his proposals may be minimal... But from what I hear, he knows the weaknesses of Queen Ariel and the Blessed Child of Millis. Building a relationship with someone as well-connected as Sir Rudeus will benefit us. At present, we’re trying to replace a great loss with a smaller one, so any benefit will—”

“Shagall, be silent,” the prince said quietly. Shagall immediately clamped his mouth shut. “I understand the benefits.”

All right. So what’s the hang-up?

“What I don’t like is his manner,” the prince went on. “He speaks as though he holds us in the palm of his hand.”

Dang, so I should have bowed and scraped a bit more, huh? I guess I did lord it over him a bit. Hitting the right balance on that is tricky...

“My distaste, however, does not mean that I *want* to reject your offer. The fate of Benedikte’s child ought to be decided by parliament. I can hardly make a unilateral decision on the sudden offer of an outsider.”

“But Your Highness,” Shagall objected, “you explained to parliament that the plan is a last resort, didn’t you? If the question is whether to spare the life of a child who may cause strife in the future or lose the Death God now, parliament prefers the first option. Should a better option present itself, however, there would be nothing remiss in you taking it.”

“I’m not talking about that! Not that at *all*,” the prince replied. “My concern here is for safeguarding the position and dignity of the King Dragon Realm. If other nations see my father’s rule as indecisive, or if it should appear thus to the people, it may even call into question the loyalty of our retainers.” The prince was concerned about his father’s...no, his country’s prestige. Admirable, in someone so young.

Only...it sure seemed improper having this conversation right in front of me.

Shagall seemed to be on my side. It helped that he was friends with Randolph, I guessed. Every point he made supported my position.

“Hmmm,” the prince mused. Hey, I didn’t mind if he wanted to bring in more players and mull over the decision. We could include the king on his sickbed, maybe the prime minister, and really go through the issue slowly. Once we talked it through properly, they had to see it was a generous offer. Even if they still refused me, I had another plan ready to go: I’d already acquired all their central

players' personal information, including their preferences and their weaknesses, and I could put it all to use to clear any obstacles. I could lead them by the nose. The hard sell would certainly have repercussions, though, so I preferred to avoid it.

As we stood there in silence, a new voice said, "What did I tell you?"

All of us looked to see where it had come from, and there he was, emerging from a door off to one side and behind the throne that led into the back of the audience chamber. He was ordinary. A fellow of roughly forty with mousy blond hair, he looked bone-tired. Overall, he kind of reminded me of Ariel's older brother... No, I could do better than that. I'd met someone with an even closer resemblance—a certain someone I'd met when I went to see Shagall on Randolph's instructions—the man who'd been so valuable on the topic of the King Dragon Realm's problems. Vio Pompadour. But this was very strange. Today, he was dressed in incredible finery. Especially that king's crown resting on his head. Now where could he have gotten that thing...?

"This isn't someone you want to make an enemy of," he went on.

"Your Majesty...!" the prince exclaimed.

Here was His Majesty, King Stelvio von Kingdragon, thirty-third ruler of the King Dragon Realm.

"Listen, Kirk," he chided his son. "We can't openly make an enemy of the Asura Kingdom until we've restored order to the conflict zone. It's public knowledge that Sir Rudeus is friendly with Queen Ariel. If we accept his proposal and enter into a collaborative relationship with the Dragon God Orsted, the Asura Kingdom will be hard pressed to pull this kind of trick again. This is all for the sake of our country."

Vio... I mean Stelvio, walked over to the throne as he spoke, then changed places with the prince. Despite that decisive speech, he didn't exactly radiate competence. If anything, he was the picture of mediocrity.

"All right," he said, then addressed me. "Sir Rudeus."

"Your Majesty," I replied.

"We accept your offer," said the king, just like that.

He must have already deliberated to be so decisive. He'd probably pondered it while he sat there telling me all about this rumor and that cuisine in the King Dragon Realm. Maybe before that—maybe it was a factor in his decision to conceal his true identity to get close to me when he heard I was in town. It just happened that there'd been someone else who remained unconvinced. Maybe this whole scene had been set up in order to convince him.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," I replied. In accordance with etiquette, I bowed, but right away, a voice from directly above me said, "That's enough. Rise."

I rose obediently and the king shot me a wry smile. There was no majesty there. Just a tired man and his crooked smile.

"This is all that remains of the King Dragon Realm," he said. "We are locked into unending unrest thanks to a wavering and undignified king. I know you have your battle coming eighty years hence, and I regret that we may offer but little assistance."

"Not at all," I said. "Would you mind if I asked you something, though?"

"What is it?"

"What was with that act?" I asked. The king gave that same tired smile.

"I merely wished to learn more about you."

“Me...?”

“What you would say and do when we sat beside one another as equals, rather than me up here and you down there. I wanted to know whether you were someone worthy of trust... I don’t know of a better test.”

Oh, okay. Okay, this is who the king really is, I realized. Now I remembered what Orsted had told me. King Stelvio’s reign was not a long one. In less than a decade, he would fall gravely ill and abdicate the throne to his son. After Kirkland became king, the King Dragon Realm would make staggeringly rapid progress. That would be the true beginning for the King Dragon Realm—Stelvio was a pitstop on the way to that worthwhile destination. That was why he hadn’t stuck in my memory.

Funny, though. Right now, I was more interested in the king than in Shagall and Kirkland, the important players. In my mind’s eye, I kept seeing his face from the other day as he told us about his country’s food and famous places, and unique products. He’d looked so happy. So proud.

“Well, I think, you know, uh, that’s great,” I said.

I had a hunch that he hadn’t ever wanted to be king, or even assumed the slightest aptitude for it. And truly, he had neither aptitude nor talent. Yet he still sat on the throne, surrounded by suits of armor. And when he sat there, he had to play his part.

As long as he lived he put everything he had into being the king. He never lost his principles, and always did what he could while those around him lent him their support. That is to say, he *would*, future tense. He’d act the part of king. For the sake of his beloved country, he’d do his best.



“Hahaha. Great, is it? You’re a little overfamiliar, Rudeus Greyrat.”

“My apologies, Your Majesty,” I said. He was the kind of person who wouldn’t leave any mark on the world. Continuing to associate with him wouldn’t reap me any great benefits.

Stelvio then said, “And given that your etiquette could use a little help, let me give you a friendly word of advice. And pass it onto the former prince Zanoba, your friend who is so concerned about Lord Pax II.”

“Yes?” I replied, waiting.

“Before you seek an audience with the rulers of a country, learn their faces. Even if they’re not much to look at.”

“Ah, haha... I’ll do my best.”

Still, I thought, even as I grimaced in embarrassment at his advice, *I’d like us to be friends while he’s still alive.*

Li’l Pax’s safety was secured. As Benedikte was still part of the royal family, the King Dragon Realm took it upon itself to guarantee their safety. Benedikte was temporarily freed from the fear that dogged her, and Randolph looked like the cat that got the cream. The threat to the King Dragon Realm had also been subdued for the time being, and they’d kept Randolph, so there was plenty to celebrate. I also managed to slip in my primary reason for coming—putting out wanted notices for Geese—so that was a load off.

Setting up the mercenary company was going to have to wait for another day, but I was reassured that the current king would allow it. It looked like I’d established good relations with the King Dragon Realm. If only it hadn’t been another arsonist-putting-out-his-own-

fire-type situation, it would've been perfect...but I'd never be satisfied if I let every little quibble like that bother me.

I now owed favors to both Ariel and the pope, but I'd pay them back eventually. I assumed more trouble would crop up for Li'l Pax in another few years, but when it happened, Zanoba and I would sort things out again.

"You really did help me out," Randolph said when I went to bid him farewell. "I thought I was going to have to burn the King Dragon Realm to the ground and leave with the queen." He gave his usual rattling laugh.

He didn't have the power to do that—Orsted had told me as much—but I guess that didn't mean he wasn't willing to try. The King Dragon Realm would've had to choose whether to send soldiers for Randolph to slaughter, or a scuffle with the Kingdom of Shirone further down the road.

"If it's the good graces of His Majesty you're after, I'm afraid I won't be of any use to you. A shame. I so wanted to be your go-to fellow in the King Dragon Realm," Randolph said wistfully. "This is no good. How am I supposed to repay my debt to you now?"

"Now that the threat to Pax is gone, I'd be happy to have you fight by my side."

"Just because no one's targeting him, we can't say for sure he's in no danger," Randolph pointed out.

"You're one to talk, after starting me on that goose chase." I had a hunch that it was Randolph who'd told Stelvio I was in the King Dragon Realm. He might even have informed him if he just gave me a few hints about the problems in the King Dragon Realm, things would more or less head in the right direction.

Okay, no, that sounded a bit paranoid. I couldn't help suspecting him a bit even so... This was Death God Randolph we were talking about.

“Whatever can you mean?” Randolph said. The look on his face was as good as a full confession. “I certainly cannot predict how His Majesty will act.”

Anyway. Randolph had no plans to leave Benedikte, so I couldn’t rely on his strength for the fight against Geese...but that wasn’t the end of the world.

Zanoba cut in. “Yes, Sir Randolph’s place is without a doubt here with Lady Benedikte and the little prince.” Zanoba had waited here with Randolph and Benedikte, just in case the negotiations went south, set to spring into action if things got severely out of hand and the king ordered Li’l Pax’s summary execution or whatever. I’d done my best to ensure that didn’t happen, and in the end it hadn’t. Their presence was an insurance policy, nothing more.

“Thank you. And so I will remain,” Randolph replied with a grin that as good as said, *All according to plan*. “Having said that, you must allow me to express my gratitude, even if it is only a gesture. My ‘too cool for gratitude’ reputation shall follow me into the next life at this rate.”

I doubt it. You’re going to be remembered as more of a con man. No matter what you do.

“On which note, Sir Rudeus, I think you’re acquainted with the Demon World’s Great Emperor, Kishirika Kishirisu?”

“That’s right. I’ve run into her a couple of times.”

“If you’re hunting for someone, I’d suggest hunting her down first.”

Oh yeah... Kishirika is around.

Randolph had a point. Kishirika had a demon eye similar to the Eye of Distant Sight; Roxy said she’d used her powers to search for Zenith. If I asked her she might tell me Geese’s whereabouts just like that...or, if not *just* like that, she could narrow down the options a lot. Why hadn’t I thought of her before?

Wait, that's it. I wasn't a hundred percent sure I could trust her.

"She may demand some recompense, but show her this ring and say that Randolph asks it of her. Then she should hear you out, even if your request is a little unreasonable."

"Ooh."

You mean I don't even have to wine and dine her?

"Sounds good. I accept," I said. Randolph passed me a white ring. It was a creepy little thing, presumably crafted from some sort of bone. It looked cursed, but I put it on anyway.

After Randolph's letter of introduction had proved pretty useless, I wasn't sure how effective this ring would be. But Randolph, whatever else he was, took his obligations seriously. I decided that this would do for now.

"I'm just happy that Pax is safe," Zanoba said, peering at Benedikte. "Now Lady Benedikte can give all her attention to raising her child."

Uh, his name is 'Li'l Pax,' I thought. Get it right.

Benedikte didn't reply. Was she still scared of him...? But then she met Zanoba's eyes, her lips pursed.

"Th..." The sound that came out of her was almost too small to hear, and as her voice persisted she stammered over the unfamiliar words. "Thank you. I am very...grateful...for your...assistance."

She spoke from the heart, even with all the stuttering. I could tell.

Zanoba smiled, then clapped his hands together like he'd just remembered something. "Ah, yes. I almost forgot," he said, then called, "Julie!" Standing behind him, she nodded, then lowered her pack and pulled out a box. The box was painted white and decorated like a fanciful building...

Hold on, I've seen that somewhere before, I thought. Aha! It looks like the royal palace in Shirone.

Julie opened the box. The inside was decorated like a canopied bed, and in the bed lay a figurine.

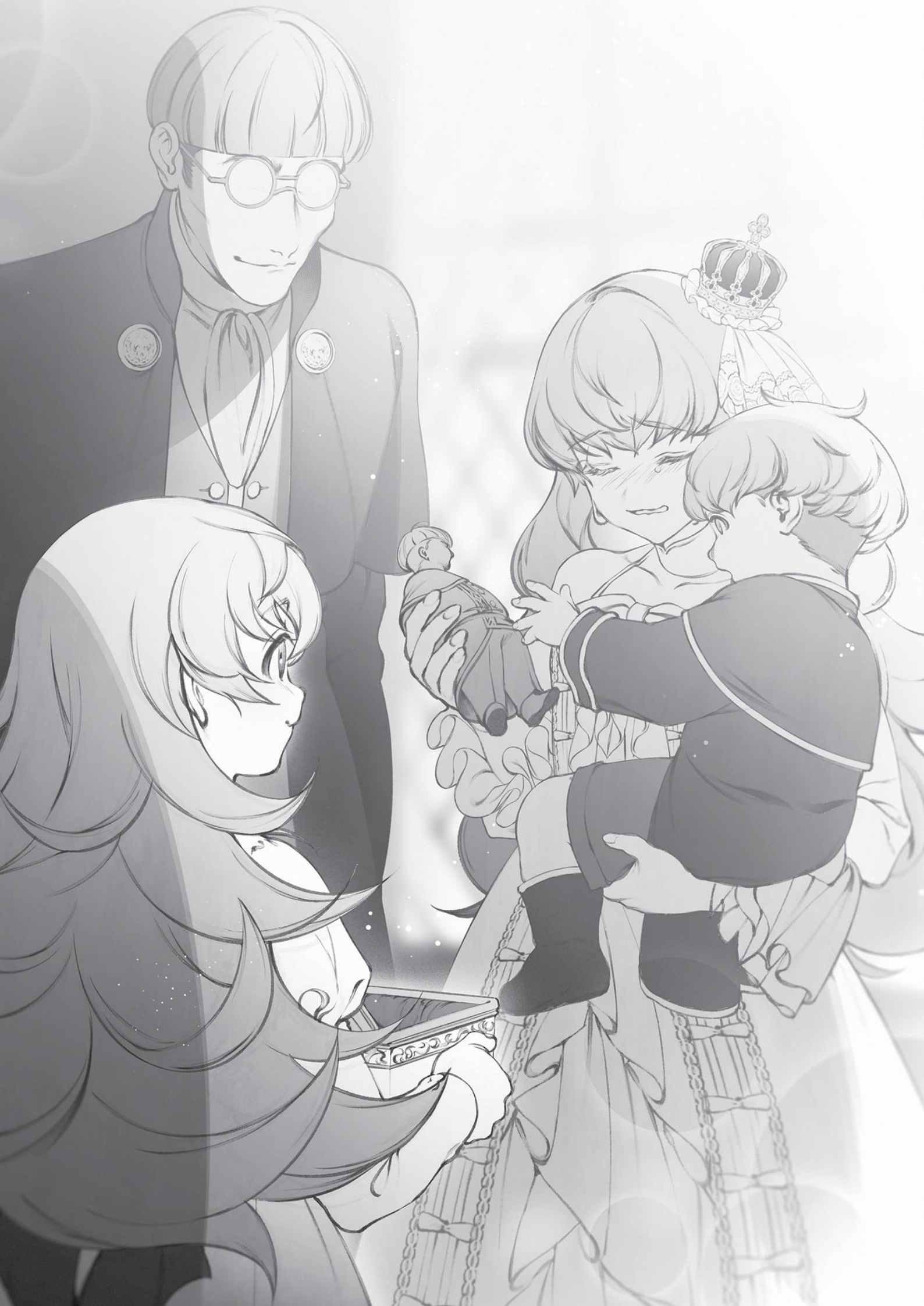
"Oh," Benedikte said softly.

"I had it made for this day. I hope you will accept it," Zanoba said. Benedikte slowly reached to pick up the figurine from the bed and gazed at it, wide-eyed. It was short and blond, a bit on the plump side. A glance was enough to see that it was *him*. It was a figurine of Pax.

"As his reign was short, I believe there are no portraits. I made it from memory. Julie here did the actual crafting."

"Th...tha..." Benedikte began to cry, fat tears running down her cheeks. She looked at the figurine, trembling all over and sobbing. She gave a wet sniff to pull herself together and turned to face Zanoba.

"I'll...treasure it," she said, cradling her son in one arm and the Pax figure in the other.



"I'm glad to hear that," Zanoba said. "But nothing material is indestructible. When it becomes damaged, send word to me, and I shall come to repair it at once."

"I...will," Benedikte said with a small nod.

Crap, watching this is gonna make me cry too. Zanoba, you done good, man.

"Well, Zanoba," I broke in, "I'd better be going,"

"Very well, Master Rudeus," he replied. "The rest is safe in my hands."

I'd decided to have Aisha, Zanoba, and Julie stay in the King Dragon Realm for a little longer to mediate things between Asura and Millis.

"I'm counting on you," I replied. Obviously I was busy, but Zanoba had plenty to do as well. Business was booming for The Zanoba Store, but I still needed them to expand further. I also needed him to continue development on the Magic Armor. He hadn't had any chances to shine on this mission, but he was a reliable guy, and I'd be relying on him even more in the future.

"All right. I'll be off then."

"Farewell, Lord Rudeus. May you have strength in battle."

"You too, Randolph. Stay well."

My time in the King Dragon Realm had come to an end.

Next stop: the Demon Continent. I wasn't going there to look for Kishirika. C'mon. I didn't have the time to go around asking after someone who could be literally anywhere. I'd still keep an eye out for her—I wasn't stupid. It was a low priority, that's all. No, I had someone else to talk to there: the Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe.

**Interlude:
Blue and Red**

Roxy was at home that day, drawing up a test for school. It was meant to be her day off, but Roxy was the sort of teacher who adjusted her lessons based on her students' comprehension of the material, meaning that she sometimes ended up making tests on her own time.

"Huh?" All of a sudden, she became aware of the smell of something burning. She looked up and confirmed that the air was faintly white with smoke. Leaping up from her chair, she opened the door.

In the corridor outside her room, the white smoke hung thicker still. Covering her mouth with the sleeve of her robe, she ran downstairs. *A fire?! she thought.*

By a stroke of luck, no one else was home. Sylphie was out on a walk with the children. Usually the mothers took turns taking the children on their walk, but today, Lilia and Zenith had accompanied her. They likely wouldn't be back until early afternoon. Ordinarily, Aisha would have been home, but she was away in the King Dragon Realm with Rudeus. Anyone who'd need to be evacuated was already out.

All the same, this was their home, and it was Roxy's job to watch it. She'd be mortified if everyone came back to find the house gone, or even reduced to a smoldering ruin. Determined to stop the fire, she set off in search of the source of the smoke.

She reached the bottom of the stairs, then looked through the various doors, all of which had been left open. On the right was the living room, then on the left the dining room. The fireplace in each room was empty, and the fire didn't seem particularly close, so Roxy continued down the corridor toward the kitchen.

There, she found the source of the fire.

Technically, there were no flames. An unexpected figure loomed over the stove. She was a tall woman with long red hair twisted into a bun, and she wore black undergarments that clung to the curves of her body. It was Eris.

It wasn't unexpected for Eris to be in the house. The real surprise was finding her in the kitchen. As a rule, she never came in here. Yet today, in a shocking turn of events, here she was. Her arms were folded like always as she glared at something on the stove that was belching up billows of thick smoke. Whatever it was had long since charred to a crisp, making it impossible to identify... Roxy could just about make out that it was roughly twenty centimeters long.

Did she find a rat? Roxy wondered. Rats were *persona non grata* in the Greyrat household. The family rule was that, if you found a rat, you killed it on sight, burned the carcass while wearing gloves and a mask, then went out beyond the town limits to dispose of its ashes. Rudeus himself had established this rule. There had been something written about rats in the diary his future self had given him. He was particularly insistent that Roxy watch out for rats. Well, it wasn't as if she were a toddler shoving everything in arm's reach into her mouth, but these were the orders they had, and so she too kept an eye out. Especially while she was pregnant. But vows made in a storm are soon forgotten, as they say. She'd been less vigilant lately. But surely Eris wouldn't burn a rat in their home kitchen. Surely.

"Eek!" Eris jumped slightly as she noticed Roxy. It was exactly as though she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't.

"Sneaking a bite to eat?" Roxy inquired.

"N-no..." No sooner had Eris spoken than her stomach grumbled loudly. That was when it clicked for Roxy. With no one home today, no one had been around to make lunch. Eris was supposed to go to the University of Magic that afternoon to teach swordcraft to the

students, and usually she ate at the school cafeteria on those days. The kitchens at the university were open even on holidays.

“Why didn’t you go to the school cafeteria?” Roxy asked.

“They’re closed. The cook collapsed or something.”

“Oh dear.” As it happened, Roxy had plans of her own to stop off at the cafeteria after work, so this was unwelcome news.

Now, what happened here? thought Roxy. She pointed at the smoking lump and asked, “What’s that?”

“It’s a roast.”

“I think it’s a touch overcooked.”

“...It’s been a while since I cooked,” Eris replied cagily.

It’s a total loss, Roxy observed, then immediately used water magic to put out the fire under the stove.

“Oh—” Eris started to protest, but then she saw the charred lump emerge from the smoke and halted. The corners of her mouth turned down.

Roxy rushed to open the back door, then used wind magic to air out the room.

“You can’t eat this.”

“I know,” Eris replied, scowling at Roxy. She’d thought she was going to get in trouble.

Roxy wasn’t angry. There was no need to be angry when she understood perfectly what had happened. Eris hadn’t started a fire either, so no damage was done.

“Why don’t I make us something?” she offered.

“You can cook?”

“Hmph! You know I was an adventurer, right? I can manage basic cooking,” Roxy declared, puffing out her skinny chest.

“Huh. Okay, thanks,” Eris said, stepping back from the stove.

“It’ll be really basic, though,” Roxy added. The kitchen was Sylphie, Lilia, and Aisha’s temple. There was no rule against anyone else using it, but those three didn’t look kindly on anyone who messed it up by, say, snacking on ingredients meant for that night’s dinner. Not all the stores were off limits, however. If you got hungry, it was fine to nibble at preserved foods like dried fish, meat, and vegetables.

Roxy decided to pull from those supplies to make a soup. She used water magic to fill a pot, then lit a fire under the stove, cut up the ingredients, and threw them in. It was a bit rough to really be called cooking, but Roxy was an ex-adventurer—she wouldn’t turn her nose up at raw monster meat so long as it was edible. She also found a loaf of bread, likely baked that morning. Everyone in the Greyrat household but Rudeus were avid bread eaters.

Eris stood in a corner of the kitchen, watching Roxy work in silence.

“I didn’t think you knew how to do this stuff,” she said after a lengthy pause.

“Everyone thinks that for some reason. It’s quite hurtful, really...” Roxy replied. “Neither can you, right, Eris?”

Eris pouted. “I know how to start a fire and roast meat at least... I just messed it up this time.”

“I see. But that’s the same as most people, isn’t it?”

There wasn’t any great difference between Eris and the majority of adventurers. However, in each party, there was usually one person who was best at frying up dried food and making soup. Roxy was by no means a natural, but she had traveled a lot by herself and picked it up as a necessity.

“I was *going* to learn. Ages ago.”

“Oh? From whom?”

“...Geese.”

“Ah, Geese would make a great teacher. He was a better cook than most,” Roxy said. She deliberately didn’t change the subject. Geese might be their enemy, but that wasn’t relevant at the moment. “What did you learn from him?”



“He wouldn’t teach me,” Eris muttered.

“Why not?” Roxy inquired.

Eris’s face turned pink and she averted her eyes. “He said he couldn’t teach a woman to cook.”

“Ah. A ‘jinx’, was it?”

“Yeah, a ‘jinx.’”

Their eyes met, and they giggled.

Roxy’s soup wasn’t anything special, but it wasn’t horrible, either. It just wasn’t good. She’d mismeasured her seasonings, so the broth was way too salty, and she made far too much of it. There was enough soup for five people.

Eris seemed to enjoy it regardless. “More, please!” she said. She ate three extra helpings. She ate it more ravenously than their usual meals, if anything, but Roxy assumed she was just being polite—taking extra helpings not because it tasted good, but because it’d be rude to leave it.

Eris’s people skills were nowhere near that advanced. She was hungry right after exercising, and she’d been sweating so she was craving salt.

Eris and I have hardly ever talked like this, just the two of us, Roxy thought. Years had flown by since Eris joined the Greyrat family. They had never grown close despite their mutual respect for each other’s talents—perhaps because neither was especially good at expressing themselves in words.

“Hey, Roxy,” Eris said, cutting through her thoughts.

“Do you want another helping?”

"It's not that. I wanted to ask a favor."

"You do?" A favor. That wasn't so unusual. Eris didn't mind asking for help. She knew her own shortcomings and didn't hesitate to leave those tasks to others. "I'll help if I can."

"I want you to teach me the demon tongue."

"...I thought you'd already learned it."

"I haven't spoken it for ages, so I'm worried I've lost it."

"I see."

Rudeus was in the King Dragon Realm now, but Roxy knew he would soon travel to see Demon King Atoferatofe on the Demon Continent. When he did, Roxy and Eris would go with him. She doubted there would be much, if any, need for Eris to talk to anyone... But she imagined Eris didn't much like the idea of being left adrift, unable to follow a single conversation. She couldn't operate independently if she couldn't communicate.

"How was the soup?" Roxy said, suddenly switching to demon tongue. Eris looked surprised for a second, and then her expression became serious and she met Roxy's eyes.

"It was delicious," she replied in the same language.

"It was a little salty for my taste."

"Seriously?" Eris said, then laughed.

"It sounds like you can speak fine," Roxy said, switching back.

"I guess. I followed you better than I expected."

"Shall we try some more?"

"Yes, please."

Roxy went on chatting about everyday things with Eris in the demon language. She talked about the children, and about school, and found that in the demon language, it was easier to talk frankly

about topics she usually couldn't broach. When the conversation was over, Roxy felt like she and Eris had grown a little bit closer.

Chapter 6: Infiltrating Fort Necross

WE WERE IN THE Gaslow Territory, one of the most hostile regions on the Demon Continent. The monsters that spawned on the Demon Continent were far more powerful than those on other continents and more numerous. There was still an ecological balance, however. Just as there were large numbers of Acid Wolves and Pax Coyotes in Biegoya, so too did this region have its native flora and fauna.

There was the Basilisk, with its petrifying breath. The Black Drake, soaring unchecked through the skies with its powerful jaws and poison talons. The giant Lakewater Bug that created pools of its own mucilage, then attacked anyone who came to drink from them. Then there was the White-Fang Cobra, highly agile and covered in hard scales that resisted magic...

And beasts aside, some places belched poison gas and others gaped into deep ravines. Given that all the monsters were brutally vicious, the whole place was dotted with danger zones. As such, the Gaslow Territory in particular had a reputation as a miserable pit. Absolutely lousy with demons. Next to no towns or settlements were established there, and those that did exist were heavily fortified. Hardly any adventurers came here.

Some, however, allegedly saw this place as aspirational. It was home to the Demon Continent's greatest fort, built by the immortal Necross Lacross, one of the Five Great Demon Kings. The master of that fort was Demon King Atoferatofe—Gaslow Territory's Immortal Demon King.

In the war some four hundred years earlier, she had fought on Laplace's side, raining fury down on the battlefield and crossing

swords countless times with Armored Dragon King Perugius. There was a legend about her that was especially heeded by warriors:

“Journey forth, you who seek power.

The Demon Continent is your destination.

Travel its lands. Ascend to Fort Necross.

Show your might before the Demon King, and lust for yet greater might.

Only then may all-conquering power be yours.”

Yup—those who were in search of the fort were knights errant. They followed the legend here, seeking power. No one who made it here ever returned, so in the end, no one knew if the legend was true or a mere fairy tale.

Well, except for me.

Around half of those knights died on the journey. The majority of those who survived were assimilated into Atofe’s personal guard. Someone probably did make it home every now and then...but it takes more than one or two people knowing the truth to kill a good yarn like that. I was pretty sure that Atofe’s retainer Moore was the one spreading the rumors. It was a nasty trap, preying on purehearted warriors. Devilish, even.

Anyway. Our party that was heading to go see Atofe consisted of three members: me, Eris, and Roxy. I brought along a bottle of wine as an offering. Orsted told me that Atofe liked to drink.

There was probably still going to be a fight even if I plied her with alcohol.

Fort Necross was a three-hour journey from the teleportation circle ruins. It wasn’t such a long way, but the ruins with the

teleportation circle were deep in the mountains. Some Black Drakes were using them as a nest.

The black dragons came flying at us and we sliced them up, one after another. The dragons themselves, we barbecued, and then we turned the eggs we found into an omelet to keep our strength up as we pushed on. Drove of other monsters came swooping down from up high to attack us, so we trudged on, avoiding some and driving off others. By the time we got to the bottom of the mountain, a whole day had passed.

I'd never seen a teleportation circle this close to a human settlement before. Come to think of it, I'd never seen a human settlement somewhere so thoroughly steeped in magic.

"That was no sweat," Eris said. She'd cheerfully cut through every monster that came at us, as if to sell us on the benefits of daily training. She had few opportunities besides her constant drills to slake her battle lust, rumors that she snuck out to hunt monsters outside of town aside.

"This is a harsh place. I shudder to think of what would happen if I came here alone." Roxy looked worn out. She'd done her best to plot a route where we'd go relatively unnoticed by monsters. It was all down to her that the bottle of wine had come through unscathed.

"That's all you've got, Roxy? You're rusty!" Eris laughed.

"I can't deny that. My reflexes were a bit sharper back when I was adventuring, but now I sit around at my desk all day..."

"Better watch out, or your students won't take you seriously."

"You'll have to start training me, then."

"You're on!"

While Eris and Roxy talked, I looked down at the fort below us. The first thing you noticed was that the whole thing was black. I guessed it was built from the same material as Kishirika's castle. It

wasn't especially vast—just a castle and a town protected by thick walls. Not uncommon in this world.

What qualified it as a fort was its structure. The walls divided it into five blocks, each adjoining the others to form a terrace. The lower three were an ordinary castle town. The upper two were full of buildings with no connection to daily life and a great amphitheater. A military facility, most likely. Right at the top was a black castle-like building that towered imposingly over the rest. That would be the keep.

We ended up approaching the fortress from behind. It seemed pretty defenseless to me. It made sense, given it was protected on this side by the mountains.

"Oh, I see people," I said. They came into view as we approached: five of them, clad in black armor, standing on the wall. They'd seen us and started clamoring about something.

"Was it bad manners to arrive from this side?" I asked.

"There isn't really etiquette around that. I expect they just don't get a lot of travelers coming down from the mountains," Roxy replied decisively. Eris was already racing ahead. *What do we do if they shoot at us from above?* I wondered, but the five figures on the walls showed no signs of moving. Eventually, we reached the base of the wall. I spotted a big door, so this was probably some kind of back entrance. It was a black-painted gate in a black wall, so I hadn't noticed it from farther away, but drawing closer it became immediately obvious.

"Well met, heroes! You have done well to reach Fort Necross." Demon tongue. It'd been a while... They say you never forget how to ride a bike, but apparently a language once learned was much the same.

What was that about heroes?

“You must be stout of heart to have traversed the demon mountains!”

“Do you seek the honor of champions or the power of the Demon King?”

“Whichever, it makes no difference!”

“If you wish to enter, here!”

“First you must defeat us, Lady Atofe’s personal guard!”

In summary, they weren’t going to let us through. That tracked. No country anywhere would let in a strange man who showed up on their back doorstep.

“Very well. We’ll go around to the front gate,” I replied, also in demon tongue. When in Rome, as they say. I planned on going around as we were told. I was coming here to ask for a favor, so I ought to do things right. The black-armored figures didn’t reply. They seemed kind of perplexed. One appeared to be asking another what to do. I knew what to expect with Atofe, but this back-and-forth at the gate was a surprise. Had I said something wrong...?

“Oh and, I’d really appreciate it if you could tell Captain Moore that Rudeus Greyrat has brought Queen Atofe an offering,” I added. Maybe I should have led with that. Make it clear that I wasn’t suspicious. With that, I turned to leave, but then a voice rang out.

“Halt! You are a guest of Queen Atofe?!”

“That’s right!” I replied. “I had the honor of her acquaintance, very briefly! So I came to pay her my regards!”

There was a brief pause. “Very well! Wait there a moment!”

Well, well. They *were* going to let us in. That was a relief. Going the long way around would’ve been a pain. Eris grumbled, but I was happy to take the back entrance. If the alternative was fighting our way through each of the guard’s Ultimate Four, that was a big no thank you from me.

We were in the audience chamber at Fort Necross, an open-air affair with no ceiling. A long staircase wedged between thick pillars engraved with images of devils led up to a platform. It was ringed by candles burning with purple flame. In front of each candle was stationed a soldier in black armor standing at attention. The platform had no walls or handrails. From the edges, you'd probably get a good view of the castle town below. At the very back sat a menacingly ornamented throne.

Hold up, this isn't an audience chamber. It's more like, y'know, the place where you draw an enormous magic circle to summon an ancient archdevil or whatever—at the last possible moment. An arena where the band of brave souls fight to stop a demonic king.

That's the kind of place this was. It wasn't an audience chamber. It was an arena.

"Well met, heroes! You have done well to make it here!"

Sitting on the throne was a woman of about Eris's height who wore the same black armor as the others. She stood up, looking genuinely excited, then spread her robe with a flourish. The evening light of the sunset behind the mountains cast deep shadows over her.

She cut a truly majestic and wondrous figure. If you *just* focused on how she looked, that was.

"I am Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe Rybak!" she declared.

It had taken us about two hours to come in the back gate, be taken to Moore, and then escorted up to this arena. She must have gone out of her way to get everything ready so fast...unless she'd

waited for sunset because she knew it'd make a good scene. Regardless, it was a five-star effort.

"You should be proud to stand here, mortals!" said one of the guards. The others followed, one after another.

"Brave champions, you have overcome many trials! We ask you this!"

"Do you seek the honor of champions? The renown of heroes? Or perhaps...the power of the Demon King?"

What a mean question. If you said honor or hero, you got the crap beaten out of you then made to serve the Demon King. If you said you wanted the power of the Demon King, you got the crap beaten out of you then made to serve the Demon King. It was an ultimatum to which the only answer was "yes."

Eris snickered.

Eris is smirking? Right, she's into this sort of thing.

"Lady Atofe...mumblemumble..." One of the guards wrapped up in black armor standing beside Atofe went to whisper something in her ear. Something about today's itinerary, perhaps. I'd made it clear that I was here to apologize, but now we were talking about heroes and whatever. Chances were high that some misunderstanding had occurred.

"Shut up! Like I can tell from over here when it's so bright!"

Atofe Punch! Moore went flying.

"Show me your faces!" Atofe demanded, striding over. The fist she'd just used to punch out Moore was still clenched tightly. She came right up to me, then said, "Oh." The moment our eyes met, her mouth twisted in an evil smile, and she breathed, "It's *you*."

Gotcha, was what it sounded like. Scary.

"...Um, good to see you after all this time."

“After that—after you and Perugius! That trap you set for me, and you just—you come to me, you stroll on in here...” A vicious smile was spreading across her face. But I’d seen this coming. That’s why I brought an offering. I was here to apologize. Honestly.

“Yeah, about that... I’d like to, ah, offer you an apology—”

“Very good! You’ve grown into a man since I saw you last. I like that face on you; that’s the face of a man who isn’t afraid. All the brave souls who challenged me wore such a face!”

Atofe hadn’t listened to a word I’d said. She just pressed her face up close to mine, eyes wide with excitement, then bared her teeth in a grin. I could practically see the lens flare on her fangs.

“That’s the face of a man who isn’t afraid to die.”

Wh-what? That’s weird. I’m sure I anticipated all this... Huh? How come my legs are shaking? Ah, crap. Not just my legs, I’m shaking all over...

“Huh?” Just then, something red filled my field of vision. Red hair.

“Stand down,” Eris said, inserting herself between me and Atofe.

“Who’re you?”

“I’m Eris Greyrat.”

“Oh *ho*.” Atofe took a step back. “That fearlessness. That burning rage. That sword of yours. And even now you’re thinking about swinging it at me.” She appraised Eris with a piercing gaze. Eris glared back with a feral gleam in her eyes.

You could have cut the tension with a knife.

“Are you a champion?”

“That’s right,” Eris retorted.

You are not! What are you even doing?

“That woman beside you, she’s sure appraising her surroundings... Is she a magician?”

“...I am,” Roxy said hesitantly, tipping the brim of her hat. “My name is Roxy Greyrat. It’s an honor to make your acquaintance.”

I feel like you could’ve figured out she was a magician from the outfit...

“You look fearless as well. Are you going to fight me?”

“If you are set on killing my apprentice, Great Demon King, I will do what little I can to stop you.” Even level-headed Roxy was gearing up for a fight. I must’ve looked really scared if they were squaring up to protect me.

Come on. Pull yourself together.

“So then...you’re...” Atofe turned to look at me. I wasn’t shaking any more. I returned her stare with determination. “What about you?”

What about what about me? What’s that supposed to mean? I don’t know how to answer that.

I forced myself to calm down and think. Eris was a champion; Roxy was a magician. Sylphie wasn’t here, but she’d probably be a magic knight or a thief. So I’d be the cleric... Wait, no. Cliff was way more of a cleric than I was. I obviously wasn’t a warrior, either. Which left...

“I’m a magician?” I tried.

“Moron! As if you’d have two magicians!”

Getting called a moron by a moron, ouch... Okay, I got the logic. One person per class. That was the rule.

Wait. But if I wasn’t the magician, what was I? In this party, what role fit me best?

Hold on. Here we need to take a deep breath and look at the big picture.

Eris was the champion. She'd literally strode up to shield me from Atofe as I stood here trembling. My role was to be rescued by her... Meaning...

"I'm the princess?" I tried again.

"Eh heh heh, princess, you said? Eh heh heh...heh?"

Crap, I confused Lady Atofe. There was doubt in that laugh.

Atofe had been staring at me like a carnivore eyeing up its prey, but now she glanced around, looking a little lost.

Roxy rolled her eyes. "Don't be silly."

Eris, taking her side, added, "Yeah, you know what you are. A sage or whatever!"

The thing is though, Eris, after becoming Rudeus the Celibate, I haven't been all that sage-like. I'm a fool. Ariel even suggested I become a jester...

"Whatever, I don't care. I'm Rudeus Greyrat."

I am who I am! And nothing more or less!

"Eh heh heh, that's funny! All three of you are Greyrats, I see... Associates who just happen to have the same name banding together! That's hilarious!"

It was pretty funny, when you interpreted it like that, but Eris and Roxy were both my wives.

Good. I was regaining my composure.

"Lady Atofe. Before we fight, will you at least hear me out?" I said. I made my quaking legs behave, then faced her.

"Why?" she said.

"Because I came to talk to you."

"I hate talking. Nothing you humans say makes any sense."

"I think today it'll be quite straightforward," I said, then looked over at Roxy.

She lowered her pack, then from it produced a wooden box. I took it, raised it up before me, then held it out to Atofe in tribute. “First of all, I offer this. A gift to express my apologies for the past.”

“What is it?”

“Wine from the Asura Kingdom.”

“Booze!” Atofe exclaimed, her attitude totally changed.

It was exactly as I’d been told. According to Orsted, one of the champions who’d come to fight her had challenged her to a wine-tasting battle, then tried to beat her after getting her drunk off her face. The final result, by the way, was a loss for Atofe. At wine-tasting, that is. She’d won the actual fight.

“The Notos Greyrats gifted this wine to the Asura Kingdom at the coronation. It is both rare and very expensive.”

“Does it taste good?”

“Very,” I replied.

I hadn’t sampled it myself, so I had no idea if that was true or not. Ariel said it had been made a hundred years ago. It was supposed to be so delicious that the winery that produced it and their vineyards had been made into a supplier exclusively for the use of the royal household. It would be a waste to simply down it all, so the wine was left to rest in the depths of the winery’s cellar, only brought out on vanishingly rare occasions. A hundred years had passed since then. Lately, the royal household had hosted a great number of important events, so the supply had been totally exhausted. But that was only the royal household’s supply. Some still remained in the vaults of the Notos Greyrats who had produced it. They had given ten bottles from that vault to Ariel at her coronation—Pilemon’s attempt to suck up. Nowadays, one bottle was worth around three hundred Asuran gold coins, or about two Linias. It *ought* to be good.

I didn't pay for it. Are you kidding? I asked Ariel if she had any good alcohol, and she'd given it to me. I didn't learn how much it cost until much later. That was a bit of a shock.

Between the pricey booze and how readily she had agreed when I came to her about the King Dragon Realm, it really felt like Ariel was fishing for a favor, lately. It made me a bit nervous. One day soon she might call it in.

"It's good, huh?"

"Yes. So I hope you'll forgive me for the past."

"I will. I'm far more generous than Perugius could ever be, y'know! I won't hold a grudge over something stupid like that."

"Thank you very much," I said. Now that debt was canceled out, at least. I think? She might forget she'd forgiven me once she'd drunk the wine, though.

"But I won't forgive Perugius. One day I'm gonna kill him."

That's between you two. I won't stand in your way. Perugius was hardly about to trek out here to kneel before her.

"Was that it?" Atofe asked.

"No, there's one more thing."

I reached into Roxy's pack and took out another bottle. This one was from Orsted. It didn't come with a wooden box, so I didn't know its maker or its price. There was some kind of writing engraved into the old bottle, and the liquid was cloudy. Orsted had said that Atofe would probably appreciate it, so I doubted it had gone bad.

"This is—"

"Whoa!" Atofe exclaimed, snatching it from me. "No way, this is—you gotta be kidding! Mwahahaha!"

The suits of black armor started muttering at her sudden outburst. Amidst the uncertainty, one sidled over to us. It was

Moore, the guy who'd been lying in a pool of blood after having his face smashed in earlier.

"Look! Well?" Atofe demanded.

Moore took the bottle and scrutinized its surface. Then he noticed a marble-like object submerged in the liquid and made an exclamation of surprise.

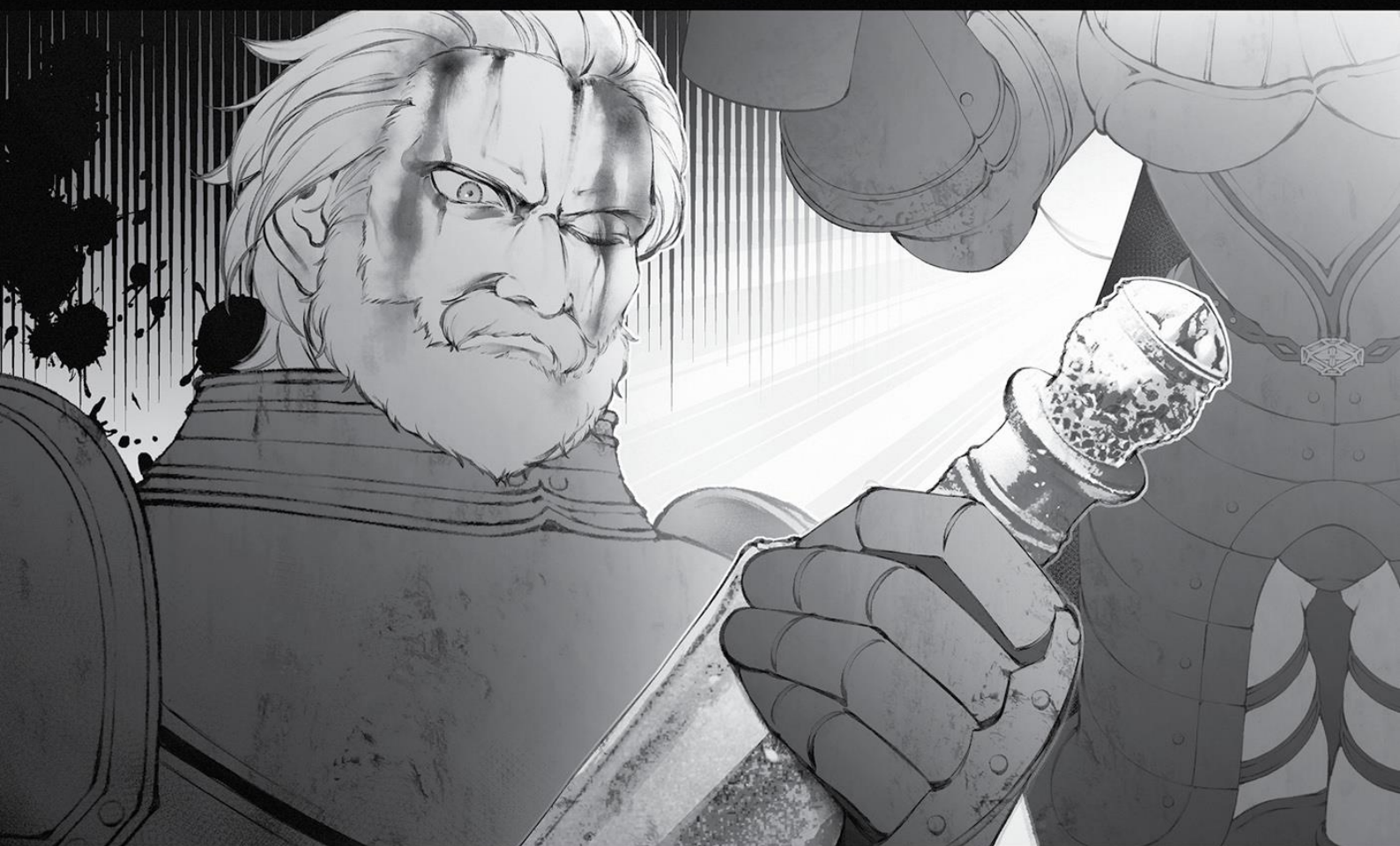
"It's exactly the same as the last one," he said.

"Right?!" she agreed, then turned to me again. "Oi, you! Where'd you get this?"

"Well, my master, the Dragon God Orsted said to bring it if I wanted to befriend Lady Atofe—"

"The Dragon God?! That settles it then!" Atofe trembled all over as she gazed at the bottle. "This is the very drink Urupen sent Carl and I when we got married! The fabled secret spirits of the Dragon Clan!"

Ahhh, so that's the story. No wonder she likes it.



"Its name: Nile Ale, the Dragon God's Jewel!"

Man, what a killer move. I've got goosebumps.

Was the stuff inside actually ale? The color of the bottle was so dark it was hard to tell.

"That day was the one time I got to drink this, never once before or after. I've been hunting for it ever since, but now I've found it at last!" I practically heard a *Da da da dan!* sound effect as she raised the bottle. She looked thrilled.

I was just happy that the gift went down so well.

I felt bad we'd bowled over Atofe so easily, but this was a crushing victory for Orsted.

"So, that ale—"

"That's it! I'll beat you and then the ale will be mine!" Atofe declared, the wine in her right hand and the Nile Ale in her left. She took what she wanted by force. A demon king to the end.

"I'm giving it to you!" I said quickly.

"You what?!"

"It's a small symbol of friendship offered by the Dragon God Orsted to the Immortal Demon King Atofe!" I shouted.

When talking with Atofe, it was important to be loud and forceful so that you didn't get steamrolled.

"Eh?" A question mark popped up above Atofe's head. Around three had materialized while her brain shorted out. "What, are you chicken?" she yelled. "Fight me!"

"We can fight if you want, but I'm giving you the ale!"

"I don't get it!"

You don't get it, huh? That's too bad. I tried to explain it as simply as possible...

“It’s not a banquet, it’s not a party, and it’s not a thank you or an apology. Why would you give this to her?” asked Moore.

Moore to the rescue. Right, I did need to explain that bit.

“The thing is, I have to fight this guy called Geese in the near future. He’s gathering powerful warriors under him to bring me down... I was hoping to ask Lady Atofe for her assistance in that battle.”

I wasn’t going anywhere near the subject of the war with Laplace eighty years from now. Orsted said that even if I asked her to work with me to fight Laplace, she’d never agree, and it’d likely end in a battle. She wasn’t duty bound to Laplace or anything—it was simply too difficult for her to understand. In all the futures Orsted knew, Atofe fought for Laplace without fail, so he’d arrived at the conclusion that it was easier not to bother persuading her otherwise.

I could talk to Moore about the details later.

“You want Lady Atofe to fight together with you?” Moore said.

“That’s right,” I replied. Thanks to Moore’s easy-to-understand translation, Atofe seemed to be following the conversation.

“Aha, I get it! I’m no dummy! I like it! Let’s do it!”

Wait, never mind, that sounded like she *wasn’t* following. She was nodding like Eris did after saying “Okay!” when she had no clue what was going on.

At least this response meant Geese stood zero chance of smooth-talking her into anything.

“Is that all you have to say?!” she demanded.

“Yes.”

And thus, I won Atofe’s allegiance. The Death God and the Immortal Demon King. By getting two people who’d beaten me before on my side, I felt like I’d gained a major advantage. Wherever Geese was, whatever he was doing, right now I felt like things were

going smoothly on my end. At any rate, I'd come here prepared to have to fight. Avoiding that was a huge relief—

"Now, we duel!" Atofe yelled.

Um?

"You said, 'before we fight' before! You're done talking. It's time to duel!"

Um, did I say that? I... Wait, what?

I gave her the wine, then she forgave me. Then she promised to join my side... There was no reason for us to fight. This wasn't right. Orsted hadn't said anything about this!

"I am Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe Rybak! Come at me, all three of you heroes!"

Why, though...?

I was hesitating and there was a question mark hovering above Roxy's head. Atofe's personal guard didn't seem surprised, so this was probably Atofe's usual routine. There was a general sense of "Not again..." among the audience. Moore seemed similarly resigned.

Only one person stepped forward as though they'd been waiting for this.

"You'll fight me," said Eris. She strode right up to Atofe until their noses were practically touching, as though she could care less about distance.

"You wanna fight me one-on-one?" Atofe said. They looked like they might kiss, they were so close, staring each other down.

"You're not worth Rudeus's time," Eris hissed.

"You talk big, kid," Atofe replied. Eris's goading had hit its mark. The murder in her eyes grew more and more intense. "In a hundred years, you're the only one who's ever talked like that to me."

It would have sounded pretty badass if she hadn't been holding a bottle in each hand. She'd smash them for sure if she launched into a battle like that...

Just then, Moore appeared at her side, saying, "I'll look after those," and took them away.

"You'd do well as one of my guards. I'll smash you to a pulp, then add you to their ranks," Atofe said.

"When you lose, will you hear Rudeus out?" Eris retorted.

"Fine."

Fight, win, make nice! Was she that simple? I guess I'd messed up. I'd been thinking about this wrong. "Here's an offering, to forgive me, okay? And here's another offering, so become my ally, okay?" All too complicated for Atofe!

Fine, fine. I knew from the start that this fight was practically inevitable.

We'd fight, win, then make Demon King Atofe our ally. We'd prepared for this.

All right, let's go.

"Lady Atofe, please wait." It was Moore. He ran over to Atofe, then whispered something in her ear. He was trying to convince her not to fight, I guessed. Ah, there was nothing like a man with a little sense. There was no point in pointless fighting. Love and peace.

"Say what...?" Atofe didn't look pleased at whatever he was saying. Telling a battle-starved demon king not to fight was insanity.

See? Now Lady Atofe's mad. She's gonna punch you, I thought, just as Atofe called out, "Hey, you!" at me. She was beckoning. *Crap, was I going to get punched?* I wondered if I could block it... If she hit me in the face like with Moore I was a goner.

I walked, trembling, over the Atofe, but she just stared intently at me. She didn't seem like she was winding up for a punch.

“You’re the princess,” she said.

“Huh? Oh...I guess? Um, I think so?”

“Eh heh heh. Here I thought you were a man.”

“I am a man.”

“Say what? You’re a princess even though you’re a man?”

Gender’s so fluid these days. Anyone can be a princess, I thought, but shut my mouth tight before I could say it out loud. Overly complicated words were a guaranteed ticket to getting my face bashed in.

“Hmph. Fine. Let’s do this!” Atofe suddenly grabbed me around the waist, lifted me up, and threw me over her shoulder.

Uh oh, a piledriver?! But it’s okay! The Magic Armor will handle it!

I braced myself, but she didn’t move to throw me on the ground. She held onto me like a sack of potatoes. If I was a princess, she shouldn’t haul me over her shoulder like this! It should be more, I don’t know, dainty-like?

“Rudy?”

“Rudeus?!” Roxy and Eris cried out. When I looked for them, I found the ground was suddenly far away. Atofe, with me on her shoulders, was flying.

This was bad. Way worse than a piledriver. Some other, more incredible move was coming...like a demon-king bomb! Crap! If I fell from this height, my skull would crack open like an egg! I squirmed, then got both my arms around Atofe in an attempt to escape—

“Hey! Hands off my butt!” she yelled. I hurriedly let go.

It’s not like that, I swear. I wasn’t groping you or anything, and I definitely wasn’t being unfaithful! I didn’t have any control over it.

She did have a nice butt, though. It was tight. Nothing but the best on a demon king, heh.

While I fretted, Atofe called out, “Champion! I have your princess! If you want her back, take her from me at Fort Necross!”

Um, I’m pretty sure this is Fort Necross...

“Eh heh heh... Mwa hah hah, mwaaaahahahaha!” she cackled. Her voice echoed through the back of my skull as the ground shrank further and further away. Where in the world was she taking me? What was going *on*? In the midst of my confusion, I caught a fleeting glimpse of Eris and Roxy, gawping up at us in stunned amazement.

Chapter 7: Dueling Atofe's Ultimate Four

RUDEUS HAD BEEN KIDNAPPED. Eris and Roxy had watched in blank shock as Atofe slung him over her shoulder and shot up into the sky. They were slow to react, both because it all happened so fast, and because it was so...blah. A real anticlimax. Atofe had picked Rudeus up like it was the typical next step in the process and Rudeus had resigned himself to it. Maybe he knew, somehow, that this was all part of the routine from her perspective.

"Rudeus!" Eris yelled. Once she'd processed that Rudeus had been kidnapped, she acted fast. With a mighty yell, she drew her sword and ran after Atofe. Atofe's personal guard stood in her way, so she attacked them.

"Guh!" grunted a guard who parried her, thrown on his butt by the force of her blow.

"Outta the way!" Eris demanded.

"Stop, listen!"

"Tell your demon king that!"

"Hrm..." The guy trailed off, at a loss for words.

Had Rudeus been there, he might have raised an eyebrow at Eris talking like that. She wasn't as bad as Atofe, but Eris wasn't a listener by any means.

"Please listen to me!" the guard insisted.

"I don't have anything to talk to you about! Give Rudeus back!"

"Fine, okay, here goes..." He cleared his throat. "Steps there are that you must take if you want the princess back! Mwahahahaaa!"

"Are you screwing with me?!"

“Whuh?!” The guard barely managed to deflect Eris’s second blow before retreating a few steps back.

Eris howled, her gaze roving around the sky. Above them, Atofe kept flying in circles. It was like she was antagonizing Eris personally, which only intensified Eris’s frustration. But there was nothing she could do against an opponent who could fly.

Then she saw Atofe alight upon a corner of the fort. Her eyes lit up. She dashed forward again.

“Eris, stop,” came a calm voice from behind her.

Eris spun around. “How come?!” she demanded. Holding onto the hem of Eris’s shirt, calm and collected, was Roxy. “Did you not see?! She kidnapped Rudeus! We’ve gotta save him!”

“The guards said there are steps we have to take if we want to do that,” Roxy said patiently. “Why don’t we hear what they are first?”

“But, Roxy!”

“Eris, please calm down. Look at me. I’m calm.”

So what if you are? Eris might well have thought, but Roxy’s words struck a chord with her. She recognized that she was, in fact, not thinking clearly, and even began to consider that maybe she should. If you lost your cool in battle, your rage rose to the surface. When that happened, your opponent could read your sword. And once they did, the battle was as good as lost. She knew that from Isolde’s training. That explained how the guards had parried her so easily.

Eris lowered her sword from above her head to a neutral position, then took a deep breath. Her fear over Rudeus was making it impossible for her to stay still. She tried to contain it but couldn’t.

“I’m worried about Rudeus,” she said.

"I know," Roxy agreed. "But there's a legend about Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe."

"A legend?"

"Yes. In the legend, our demon king kidnaps a princess as a prank."

Eris relaxed. She'd heard that story herself.

It was a common tale about Atofe—actually, about a few different demon kings. The sort of tale where a demon king kidnaps the princess, then the hero has to overcome their challenges to save her. When Eris was little, she'd heard stories like it time and time again and dreamed of one day being in a similar tale.

At the same time, she realized that this princess thing all started because of what Rudeus had said. Her expression changed to indignation.

One thing still didn't make sense to her.

"What happens to the princess after the kidnapping?" she asked. When she was little, that question had never crossed her mind.

"The demon king summons the hero."

"Okay, then what?"

"Then they fight, I believe."

Question marks popped up over Eris's head. This wasn't adding up.

Hadn't they been about to fight Atofe? It looked that way. A fight should've been the next logical step.

So why?

"I don't get it," Eris said.

"Shall we ask them about it?" Roxy suggested.

Eris hesitated, but then she nodded and said, “Fine.” She didn’t have the firmest grasp on how they had ended up here, but she knew from their everyday life that she could trust Roxy.

The other woman might be a bit spacey, but she was brimming with know-how and she took good care of everyone. She also listened patiently to Eris’s worries when they came up and explained anything she didn’t understand.

Once, out on a walk in Sharia, they were surrounded by a band of weirdo adventurers. It was a dicey situation. If Eris had been alone with Leo, she could’ve come out swinging, but Lara chose that day to cling desperately to Leo’s back. Eris couldn’t let things get violent. At the same time, the adventurers didn’t look likely to stand down. How could she fight *and* keep Lara safe? While Eris stood there trying to work out this dilemma, Roxy took charge. She swiftly placed herself between Eris and the adventurers, then got them both talking and brought everyone onto the same page. The situation was resolved in mere moments.

Roxy was reliable—especially at times like this, when Eris didn’t know what was going on.

“Okay, you take this one,” Eris said. She returned her sword to its scabbard, then folded her arms. Everyone had their time to shine and if now was the time for a discussion, it wasn’t hers.

“Very well,” Roxy said, stepping forwards to address the guards, “I have some questions if that’s all right. What are these ‘steps’?”

Her tone was cool and collected, but on the inside, Roxy was terrified. Atofe’s personal guard was legendary on the Demon Continent. They were a top-level militant group with the gear and skills to match. Handpicked by Atofe, they had the lofty reputation as the toughest gang in the whole Demon Continent. Should they decide to attack while she was surrounded, Roxy doubted she’d get

out with her life intact. Even Eris standing beside her did little to allay those fears.

But this was the hand she'd been dealt. She was facing this with Rudeus. He always told her, *I'm counting on you*.

She was confident that she was *not* the hero for this crisis, but she wanted to live up to his expectations. Then there was what he'd said to her before they left for the Demon Continent.

Rudeus told her that if something happened and he was separated from them, her job was to rein Eris in. Roxy hadn't expected that they would be separated through such bizarre circumstances, but she had to keep it together, nonetheless. Otherwise, there was no point in her coming along in the first place.

The man Eris had attacked before grunted, then backed away. Another guard advanced. This one wore the same armor as the last. There was no way to tell them apart.

Calmer now, Roxy noted that the guards weren't agitated, either. Their shining black-plate armor and great swords were intimidating, but she didn't sense any murderous intent in them—unlike Eris. Taking this into account, Roxy decided that here there was a chance for rational conversation. It was a nice change after their brain-melting “chat” with Atofe.

The guards' representative cleared his throat, then proclaimed, “Heroes! You have done well to reach the heart of Fort Necross!”

“You must be strong indeed to have fought your way through the personal guard of Demon King Atofe!”

“We commend you! None can deny your valor!”

“Yet we are Atofe's personal guard! We must defend our honor and our pride!”

“If you wish to try your might against the Immortal Demon King Atofe and take back the beautiful princess...”

“First you must defeat the pinnacle of Atofe’s personal guards: the Ultimate Four!”

Four figures stepped forward out of the ranks of the guards. They drew their swords, beat the pommels of their blades against their armor with a loud *clang*, then raised them high. Roxy didn’t recall fighting her way through them at any point, but based on what they were saying...

“So, if I’ve got this clear,” she said, “all we have to do is beat you, then we get Rudeus back?”

“Eh heh heh, I don’t know about that!” snickered the guard. “The princess’s wishes might work miracles, but I wouldn’t get your hopes up if I were you.”

“Look,” Roxy said, “I know he called himself a princess, but out of all of us, Rudeus is the real champion. Or at least, he’s the strongest fighter... Is that not a problem for Lady Atofe?”

“Huh? Oh, um...” With a small sigh, the guard speaking for the rest knelt before Roxy, then leaned in close and whispered, “You know how in the tale of Demon King Keserapasera and the heroic Steel-Cutting Atmos, the princess stumbles across the Eternal Flame and burns through the harder-than-iron fur of the demon king with it, leading the hero to victory?”

“Um?” This sudden change of subject threw Roxy for a loop.

The spokesman sighed again, then whispered, “Look, I’m not supposed to say this, but the point is, the line about the princess working miracles means that Lady Atofe will let the princess join in the fight against her. So yes, it’s fine for the princess to fight the demon king too.”

“Oh, I see,” Roxy replied. “I’m sorry, I don’t know those sorts of stories very well.”

“Yeah, that’s normal. Especially these days! For a few hundred years now, we haven’t had any champions at all. Hardly anyone knows the stories.”

“Goodness, really?”

“Yeah. This is my first time doing the champion confrontation, actually.”

Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe was notorious. For the past few hundred years her notoriety held firm even though she hadn’t lifted a finger to warrant it. Laplace’s War ended, then North God Kalman bested her, and she hadn’t left the Demon Continent to incite any wars since. She’d barely fought anyone at all. At most, she’d gone around pestering other demons of her rank.

As a result, her current personal guard had never dealt with challengers before. There were plenty of random knights errant who dropped by the castle, however, so they knew how to treat visitors.

“Are we meant to fight them?” Roxy asked. “There are only two of us, so two-on-four?”

“Oh, no. They come out one at a time. So you’ll do two-on-one four times.”

“Very well.” With the administrative details taken care of, Roxy turned back to Eris. “We’ve reached an understanding.”

“Okay, so what’s happening?”

“He says if we beat them, we’ll get Rudeus back, and then we can fight Atofe.”

“Huh, that’s pretty simple.”

“If we lose though, we might—”

“We won’t lose.”

“You’re right,” Roxy agreed. Eris, she could see, had regained her clear focus. She tightened her grip on her staff.

“I am Calina! King-tier North God knight and one of Lady Atofe’s Ultimate Four: Calina of the Wind!”

The first guard to step forward was a woman. She immediately pulled off her helmet and chucked it off the platform. The other guards scrambled to catch it—their gear was expensive and they’d be in trouble if they lost any of it.

“Champions! I have been waiting for you!” The face of the woman beneath the helmet was reptilian. She had yellow scales, hair like a mass of needles, and a pointed nose; her whole face was covered in scars that told of her long history as a warrior.

“I train in the special training hall here at Fort Necross! I have many students! Lady Atofe’s grandchild is one such student! I train them hard! Have you got any students?! You oughta get some! Students will respect you!

“You may wonder why I’m training in a place like this! It’s all so that one day, I can challenge Lady Atofe! For every hero and champion I defeat, I earn the right to challenge Lady Atofe!

“Now, champions, let us fight! Lose quickly so that I can use you to become stronger still!”

Calina rambled on and on without any regard for who was listening. Meanwhile, Eris drew her sword without a word. She didn’t care one damn what Calina had to say. The person before her was her opponent. Opponents who talked that much pre-fight were North God Style and Water God Style users. Eris, a practitioner of the Sword God Style, didn’t speak. She’d never been great at speeches anyway. She raised her sword high.

“Oops, sorry. I’m talking too much, aren’t I?” Calina said, catching herself. “Fighting time! Here I go! Just—”

Eris moved as Calina said, “Here I go.” She was smooth and efficient. Her sword was held high above her head and she swung it down. It was a movement she’d practiced over a hundred times every day since her time at the Sword Sanctuary. She must have done it tens of thousands of times.

She slashed down on the diagonal. Even as her blade began to move, it was already too fast for the human eye to perceive: this was the Sword of Light. It made no sound. Before anyone knew what was happening, it was over. Her blade came to a halt on Calina’s other side, after which Eris slowly raised the sword back above her head.

Okay, it was not—strictly speaking—accurate to say that no one knew what was happening. Calina knew. She had a special ability, a sixth sense that let her see danger coming. As she said, “Here I go,” she’d seen her death flash before her eyes.

This ability of hers was a little different from Rudeus’s Demon Eye of Foresight. She’d had it since she was little. Whenever she faced imminent death, she sensed it and she’d know that, unless she acted then in that moment, she was going to die. She didn’t know if her danger-sense was accurate because she had never ignored it to find out. All she knew was that the ability kept her alive. It got her out of close brushes with death time and time again, and that was why she’d gone knocking on the North God’s gates. So when she said, “Here I go,” and her death flashed before her eyes, she dived out of its way.

She didn’t avoid the strike altogether. She managed to move her upper half about ten centimeters out of the way. Ten centimeters was enough to save her life. She felt with perfect clarity the sensation of the blade cutting through her body. She saw it slice down from the upper left, entering around her left shoulder and

exiting where her left leg met her torso. She saw both arm and leg detach from her body—a perfect cross-sectional diagram of a suit of armor. She'd never seen such a clean slice. Her left leg was severed and, unable to stay upright, she toppled to the ground with a *clang*. Her arm hit the ground at the same time, leaving only her severed leg, braced by her armor, still standing.

“That was *too fast...*” someone muttered. Maybe Calina, maybe another one of the guards. It didn't matter. Everyone could tell who'd won. Eris looked down at Calina as she had earlier, now smirking.

The arena was silent. Would Eris end it? No one moved to stop her. Atofe's personal guard fought to the death. It might even be considered crass for someone who'd risen to the level of the Ultimate Four to beg for mercy. Or maybe everything was happening too fast and no one was keeping up.

For a long moment, Eris stood there silently with her sword raised. But then her expression returned to normal, and she asked dubiously, “Is it over already?”

Calina felt a chill run down her spine. Eris was saying that the fight *wasn't* over yet. She actually believed that her opponent, down an arm and a leg, hadn't given up; that the fight was still going. And Calina understood that were Eris in her place, it would be. Even if Eris lost a limb, if she were in the same state as Calina, she wouldn't yield. The students of the North God trained in how to fight even after losing a limb, although few of them were ready to sacrifice so much.

Calina was not one of those few, as much as she'd wished to be. That mindset, that willingness to sacrifice, such qualities only came to the surface when you were pushed to the brink and even there refused to yield. She'd never *assumed* that any of the opponents she'd defeated in the past shared that quality.

Calina, seeing that Eris was ready to go further than she was, said, “Yes, it’s over. You have bested me, champion. I am utterly defeated.” Thus, she accepted her defeat.

Eris slowly lowered her sword, first from a high guard to a middle guard, and then finally returned it to its scabbard. She didn’t remove her hand from the hilt. She surveyed her surroundings, never once relaxing as the waiting guards scooped up Calina and carried her from the arena. Only when she was satisfied that there was enough distance between her and the remaining three of the Ultimate Four did she take her hand from her sword.

“They’re not much, these Ultimate Four,” she said, as though nothing much of interest had happened.

She wasn’t deliberately insulting Calina. She wasn’t even dismissing the other woman as weak. She only thought that, if that was the best Calina could do, she was nowhere near as good as Auber, who also fought North God Style. Even Nina and Isolde, both of whom had trained with Eris, could have dodged her blow.

“Brave words, little girl. But Calina was the stupidest of Lady Atofe’s Ultimate Four. I won’t have you judge us all by her performance.”

“Yeah, we’re not morons like that. We’re clever.”

“Eh heh heh. That’s right, we’ll cut you to pieces with our sharpness!”

Rudeus might have commented on how cliché their bumbling bad-guy squad schtick was if he were present. Instead, Eris considered this and decided that if the others were stronger than the first woman, she should prepare herself accordingly. Eris wasn’t vain. She knew the limits of her strength.

And so, she called out for someone. “Roxy.”

“Yes?”

“Stay behind me... I swear I won’t let you get hurt,” she said.

Roxy felt a small shiver run through her. Roxy knew Eris well. She knew that Eris was a hard worker and the most natural talent in the household at doing violence.

Roxy also knew that, while not on the same level as Rudeus, Eris thought of herself as the family’s protector. When it came to stabbing things, anyway.

To Eris, family was something she protected with her sword. Roxy counted as family. There was a single exception to her rule: Rudeus. She relied on him alone in these situations. He was the only one who could keep up with her in a fight.

At that thought, Roxy felt ever so slightly ashamed.

“I am Benebene, Saint-tier North God swordsman and one of Lady Atofe’s Ultimate Four: Benebene of the Water!”

The second of the Ultimate Four looked the definition of average. He didn’t remove or fling away his helmet like Calina, and he wasn’t any bigger than the other two. Possibly he was from a particularly hairy race because white hair stuck out of the gaps in his helmet.

“A North Saint? You’re a lower tier than the last one?”

“Heh, it’s true, I can’t match Calina with a blade,” he agreed. “But skill with a blade isn’t the only thing that decides a fight.”

“True,” Eris said simply, then brought her sword up to a high guard, identical to before. There wasn’t even a millimeter’s difference in her stance. She smirked. There wasn’t a hint of murder in her eyes now. But did that mean that she’d strike in the same way as before as well, with her ultimate attack? The one you couldn’t

dodge even if you knew it was coming? Would she use the Sword of Light?

“Shall we begin?” said the man. “Come at me from whatever angle you prefer.”

The screech of metal on metal rang out as he spoke his final syllable. Eris had already struck. Her blade followed the exact same trajectory as before and came to rest in exactly the same place. She was so fast no one even had time to blink.

Just like with Calina, Benebene’s left arm and left leg hung down, and his body began to sway—except his body *didn’t* sway. His left arm and leg didn’t even fall off, though Eris was sure she’d cut through them.

Alarmed, she took a step back right as the man’s sword *whooshed* through where she was standing. Without warning, Benebene’s sword was in his hands, a black great sword like the rest of Atofe’s personal guard.

“You dodged, huh? But don’t think you—” This time Eris acted before he got to the end of his sentence. She stepped in to cancel out her previous step, then swung upward at Benebene’s right arm. A cool metallic *cling* resounded as Eris instantly brought her sword back up to a high guard.

She let out a breath, suspicious now. She’d cut him. She’d felt it, for sure. But even though she was *sure* she’d cut it clean off, Benebene’s hand remained attached to his wrist.

“You should let me finish,” Benebene said. He stabbed his sword into the floor, then grabbed his own wrist with his left hand. His right hand—or rather, the guard—popped off without resistance, and not merely in a single piece. The hand within had been split perfectly in two to produce a cross-section as clean as Calina’s body earlier.

That wasn’t the only point worth noting. The other was the hair. A huge mass of white hair clung to the inside of Benebene’s armor.

“I’ve got Sticky Clan and Hea Clan blood! Swords have never worked on me,” Benebene said. Sticky tendrils of hairlike feelers twisted into the shape of a hand, which then gripped his sword. He held it up ready to strike, staring Eris dead in the eye.

Eris’s only reply was to take another swing at Benebene. She cut down, then up, then right, then left, at his neck, his shoulder, his arms, his legs... She rained blows from every angle down on every part of his body.

Eventually, Benebene swung his sword again. None of her strikes had any effect, so there was no need for him to defend himself. Eris dodged everything he threw at her. As she ducked out of the way so that his sword missed her by millimeters, she drew gasps of admiration from the watching guards.

As a general rule, Sword God Style swordsmen were bad at dodging and defense.

Sword God Style encouraged its wielders to cut an opponent down with a single blow. Dodging was unnecessary in such a philosophy.

Eris was different. Gall Falion’s training for defeating Orsted had been based on rationality. He assumed Orsted wouldn’t be brought down with a single blow and so, judging that evasion was a technique his students would need, he’d got a North God Style swordsman to teach them and made them spar a Water God Style warrior.

His training had made a strong impression on Eris. Thanks to Auber’s lessons and her stand-offs with Isolde, no sword could touch Eris. While her sword cut through Benebene’s body, he cut only air. It was like a bout between an adult and a child. As the battle wore on, though, panic began to take root in her heart.

She inhaled sharply at the sound of dented metal. Her strike hadn't cut through Benebene's armor. All she'd managed to do was scratch him. Her Sword of Light had gone astray.

With a cry of frustration, she parried Benebene's strike near the hilt of her blade. The force pushed her three steps backward. She wasn't tired, merely at a loss for what to do. No matter where she cut, nothing landed.

Eris took a deep breath, then forced herself to calm down and think. What would Master Ghislaine do? Or Sword God Gall Falion? Unfortunately, she wasn't the fastest thinker, and Benebene attacked again before she could remember.

"Mwahahaha! You're getting tired, champion!" he cried. "It's over now!"

But then another voice rang out. *"O spirits of ice, lend us your strength! Icicle Field!"*

A sheet of spray along with a freezing wind crashed straight into the charging Benebene.

"Wha?!"

Benebene's whole body crackled. He was frozen solid in seconds.

"Eris! Now!"

Eris acted without delay. Benebene was right in front of her. She stepped in, then slid past his frozen form, her sword raking him from the side.

"Gyaaaah!" he shouted as he was cut in half. His upper half slid from his lower and fell to the ground with a thud. There was a tinkling like breaking glass as his armor shattered, leaving behind two clumps of pure white hair. Both were covered in ice and twitching slightly.

“Urgh,” he grumbled, “Damn it... Not my personal guard armor... So that was why you spent all that time on meaningless attacks...” With that, he stopped moving.

The other guards promptly ran over and carried him away.

Eris watched them blankly, then turned to look behind her to where Roxy stood, frozen to the spot with her staff still in her hand.

“I’d heard that the sticky clan were vulnerable to ice...” she mumbled “It really was effective, huh...” Roxy, seeing Eris in trouble, had used magic without knowing whether it would do any good. That it had been even more effective than she’d imagined had come as a shock.

Realizing that Eris was staring at her, she returned to her usual pose, then cleared her throat.

“I’m sorry. Should I have stayed out of it?”

“Of course not! You saved me!” Eris exclaimed. She was surprised herself. If she were honest, she’d been out of ideas. She’d never fought an opponent like Benebene before, where she could cut their armor, but not their body... Well, maybe once or twice, but she hadn’t been prepared for it this time. Had the fight gone on like that, he might have overcome her.

“You back me up, okay?”

“Understood. Roxy, on support!” Roxy answered, sounding a little happier this time.

The remaining two of the Ultimate Four laughed derisively.

“Eh heh heh, Benebene was weak! He was totally reliant on his inherited abilities.”

“He was truly one of a kind among swordsmen! Clad in the renowned black armor of Lady Atofe’s personal guard, one can see how he might grow too confident in his powers! Indeed, I envy his talents!”

“But to think he failed to pay heed to a magician even as his armor was cut to shreds!”

“He was the greatest fool amongst the Ultimate Four!”

Two of the Ultimate Four remained.

One stepped forwards. “Tremble, worms!” he declared, “For I am your next opponent!”

Thus, their bout with the third champion began.

Chapter 8: Imprisoned in Fort Necross

Rudeus

“**L**OOK, HERE WE ARE,” Atofe said. After flapping around in circles above Fort Necross, she alighted on a building located not too far away from the arena, then threw me into a room within it.

“Um, where exactly...?” I began tentatively. The room was made for a little girl. Everything was baby pink. There was a canopied bed, white furniture, lace curtains, and a fancy teapot. It looked like a room in the Asuran palace, but even Ariel’s room wasn’t this girly. The only thing that didn’t fit the aesthetic was the view out the window: reddish-brown earth, a mountain covered in spooky trees, and I even spotted Black Drakes flying around in the air above the mountain. Not that that wasn’t striking in itself...

“The princess’s room!” Atofe declared.

“Princess...? You mean this room belongs to your daughter, Lady Atofe?”

“No! I don’t have a daughter!”

I know. Orsted told me that much.

Demon King Atoferatofe Rybak had only one child. A son. North God Kalman the second.

The *Epic of the North God* currently in circulation was mostly about him. He’d slain a giant king dragon and defeated behemoths on the Begaritt Continent. He sounded like a genuine hero, but Orsted called him an “idiot boy.” As they say, like mother, like son.

“Then this room—”

“It’s your room!”

“This isn’t really my style.”

“Eh heh heh. Don’t hold out hope that your champion will come and save you! You’ll be here until you die!” Atofe cackled.

She wasn’t listening. With another “Mwaaahahahah!” Atofe left the room.

All right, what was going on here? Was I imprisoned? The door wasn’t even locked. Was this Atofe’s roundabout way of proposing to me?

Dude. I don’t get it.

“Excuse me,” came a voice from behind me, and I turned to see Moore. Thank goodness. Someone sensible.

“You appear to be confused,” he said.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Please take a seat. I’ll explain.” I sat down obediently on a ridiculously girly chair. It was pretty comfy. They must have used good materials and a really fluffy cushion. It was a bit small for me, though; more the size for someone more petite. A teenage girl would suit it perfectly.

As I sat down, Moore took the teapot and poured a cup of tea. Both the pot and the cups wouldn’t have looked out of place in the hands of royalty, specifically Asuran royalty. I’d seen the same kind used in Ariel’s chambers. The liquid that came out was a bit different, though. It was cloudier than black tea, and a more subdued color.

What is that, I wondered. Wait, I’ve seen it before. That’s Sokas tea.

Nanahoshi lusted after the stuff. Although I guess she didn’t drink it for the taste.

“Oh, thank you,” I said. “Don’t mind if I do.” At least my tea was the normal kind. I was grateful for that.

“Good. Now, where would you like me to begin?” Moore asked.

“At the beginning, then in order from there if possible.”

“From the beginning?” Moore made a thinking gesture, then, as though something had just come to him, he began to speak.

“Lady Atofe was born at the end of the first Human-Demon War.”

“Wow. So even Lady Atofe had parents, huh?”

“Indeed. Her honored mother is said to have been of great intellect, like Lord Badigadi.”

Great intellect like Badigadi...? Okay, I guess we’re going by immortal demon king standards here.

“Lord Badi grew up watching their wise mother while Lady Atofe grew up watching their father, the Immortal Lord Necross Lacross. Back in those days, Immortal Lord Necross Lacross held dominion as the most powerful of all the demon kings.”

The Immortal Necross Lacross was one of the Five Great Demon Kings from the first Human-Demon War. There wasn’t much information left about him, but compared to the other demon kings, he was supposed to have been incredibly powerful.

“Lord Necross Lacross was slain by the hero Arus. I was not yet born, and I do not know how one ends the life of an immortal king. Nor does Lady Atofe, who was but a child. Lady Atofe says that what she *does* remember is that when she saw her father die, she knew beyond a doubt that she had to get stronger and become a mighty demon king.”

Right, so now she’s like...her dead father?

Despite looking like she never thought about anything, Atofe was striving toward something.

I hadn’t met many demon kings, but it was true that of all of them, Atofe was the most archetypical. How to put it? She was like

the physical incarnation of violence and fear, or something. She just *was* a demon king. Best way I could explain it.

“However, we immortal demons do not pay heed to the past. His Majesty Necross Lacross was a mighty king, but no one knew in what way he was mighty.”

Ah, that makes sense. She wanted to be like her dad, but she only had a vague idea of what he was actually like.

Typical Atofe. This time, it was like daughter, like father. Maybe all immortal demons were like this, deep down.

Her father hadn’t left any records behind to demonstrate how mighty he’d been either. A human would have left overblown accounts of their own greatness, but immortal demons lived so long that they didn’t look back on the past. Possibly at the time, they didn’t even have the concept of keeping records. There was no need to learn from the past. That was obvious to them. If you thought like that, you didn’t leave any sources behind.

“I have a question for you, Master Rudeus.”

“Yes?”

“What kind of being is a demon king? How are they spoken of amongst humans?”

“Uh...”

Demon kings... Demon kings...

In this world, demon kings were no more than the rulers of parts of the demons’ territory. But I only thought that because I knew a fair bit about the Demon Continent.

What about an ordinary human? What did people in Asura or Ranoa say about them?

“They say they’re overwhelmingly powerful and humanity’s natural enemy, and also that they sometimes kidnap princesses—oh.”

“That’s right,” Moore said.

That’s right, indeed.

“After His Majesty Necross Lacross passed away, Lady Atofe, who knew not what it meant to be a mighty demon king, sought to learn from humans and so gathered sources from them.”

“When you say it like that it sounds like Atofe was reading them herself,” I interjected.

“It was, of course, her personal guard at the time who did the reading.”

Yeah, I thought as much.

“Various demon kings were mentioned in those texts. Those known as ‘mighty’ all bore some points in common.”

“Points in common? You mean...”

“Yes, the qualities you just listed.”

Overwhelming power, humanity’s natural enemy, kidnaps princesses.

Also, gets defeated by the hero who comes to rescue the princess.

“Didn’t you think that sounded off?” I asked.

“I hadn’t been born back then, and her underlings at the time likely knew little about humans. There were also documents amongst the demon records that contained similar stories—though, of course, the immortal demons themselves left no records. The story of how a demon king kidnapped a princess and was defeated by the hero Arus...”

Oh, right. Okay, now I get it.

During the first Great Demon War the hero Arus had taken six companions and slain all of the Five Great Demon Kings. He was the hero who beat Kishirika and brought a war that had lasted a thousand years to a close. There *had* been a story like the one Moore

described in one of the tales about him. The gist of it was that he defeated the demon king, rescued the princess, then married her and founded the Asura Kingdom. However, according to the histories I'd read at the Boreas house, Arus hadn't actually set out to save the princess and the demon king hadn't actually kidnapped her.

A human nation had, in an act of strategic diplomacy, offered the princess to the demon king as a hostage. Arus, for totally unrelated reasons, had invaded the castle and struck down the demon king. As a result, the princess ended up getting rescued. That was what'd really happened.

Authors of later years hadn't told it that way, though. Many of them added some dramatic flair to the tale of the hero Arus and his battle to rescue the princess. Some of them must have known more of the story than others. Either that or they'd just been writing pure fiction, totally divorced from history. Depending on the book, it was a different demon king who kidnapped the princess, and the princess's name and her homeland varied too. If you believed all the stories, all five of the Great Demon Kings kidnapped a princess, then the hero Arus defeated *all* of them, got a happy ending with *all* the princesses, and the newly founded Asura ended up with a whole harem of queen consorts.

And she'd...believed all of them. Lady Atofe had, I mean. She thought that what was written in those books was the truth of what heroes, princesses, and demon kings were like.

"Now I understand. So that's why Lady Atofe has such a violent disposition."

"No, no," Moore replied, "she's always been like that."

"Oh. All right then."

She hadn't transformed into violence incarnate along the way, then. That was just kinda *her*.

“She’s that sort of person,” Moore went on, “she interpreted the demon king characters in the way that was most convenient for her.”

It felt like she hadn’t so much chosen a preferred interpretation as simply ignored the parts that she didn’t like. The result: Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe, fear incarnate. Don’t get me wrong, I think it worked. There were a *lot* of humans who genuinely feared Atofe.

“Okay,” I said. “How is that related to why I was brought here?”

“You said you were a princess.”

“My just desserts, then...”

“Even in jest, you shouldn’t have said it.”

You say that now, but how was I supposed to know Atofe thinks the normal thing to do with a princess is to kidnap them and lock them up?

“So what are Eris and Roxy doing now?” I asked.

“The champions must undergo trials to demonstrate their might to the demon king.”

“Which means...”

“Essentially, if you want to fight Lady Atofe, you have to defeat her personal guard first. Miss Eris and Miss Roxy are battling with the guard’s most spectacular idio—that is, with our specially selected elite warriors.”

So Eris and Roxy were in the middle of beating Atofe’s Ultimate Four (the specially selected idiots).

“That doesn’t sound good,” I said. I wouldn’t have minded if it were for fun; Eris was spoiling for a fight anyway, so that worked out perfectly. But if it was a fight to the death, that was different. “Right. I’m very sorry, but I’d better be going. I’ve gotta go help Eris.”

Moore called after me “Wait, please.”

“You’ll have to fight me if you want to stop me. And hey, it’s not that unusual for the princess to fight too, these days.”

Something told me that fighting my way through Moore was going to hurt a bit. When I faced Atofe last time, it turned into a magical shoot-out, and I’d come out worse for wear. I’d thought about how to deal with that for the next time...but the gap in our experience was too vast. No matter what I did, the odds wouldn’t shift massively in my favor.

This time, however, I had the Magic Armor. Victory wouldn’t be determined by whoever was the best at shooting off magical attacks.

“Don’t get worked up,” Moore said. “Lady Atofe might be dead serious about all of this, but we, her servants, don’t enjoy murdering people. Not in this day and age. Even if your friends are defeated, they’ll only lose an arm or something at most.”

“You mean it?”

“Be that as it may, their opponents are all members of Lady Atofe’s personal guard. Warriors who came to this land to dedicate themselves to training for as long as it takes. I would caution against expecting an easy victory.”

I didn’t like the sound of that...but I still thought that if anyone could handle them, it was Eris. Moments like these were why she worked so hard. Well, okay, maybe this specific situation was a bit different. The point was, she was ready to wield her skills when it was demanded of her. Roxy was there with her, besides. If Eris was the brawn, Roxy was the brains. I was confident that together, they could win. Or at least, I hoped they could.

This was still Fort Necross, however. As the tales told it, it was basically the Sword Sanctum, North God Style edition. Everyone here had traversed the Demon Continent to reach it. These weren’t people who did things halfway.

Beyond my concerns about winning and losing, though, I also realized I just wanted to see Eris in action. She served as my sparring partner to train in close-combat fighting, and I still couldn't beat her, not even in the Magic Armor. I wanted to see how well she did in a place like this.

"Um, okay, can I just go and like, cheer them on?"

"You may. The princess's words of support are supposed to give heart to the heroes, after all," Moore said.

"You don't have to make fun of me."

I hurried back to Eris without much further ado.

Stay strong, O brave champions! Your princess is coming!

Chapter 9:
Princess Rudeus Enters the Fray

MOOORE TOOK ME to a high place with a good view of the arena. When we got there, the best bit of the fight was already underway.

“Eris! Don’t give up, Eris!”

“I-I can’t... Not this...They’re too...”

“Come on, I can’t—o-ow!”

Down in the arena, there were five animals with long fur, about the size of large dogs. They’d gathered around Eris, pinning her down.

Strike that. That’s not the right way to describe it.

Eris was petting the creatures as they crowded around her, looking over the moon with happiness. Roxy was trying to pull them off her, but they were too big for her. She bounced off them and couldn’t get close to Eris.

Um, I came to watch Eris being badass, I thought, not...whatever this is.

“Eh heh heh.” Beside me, Moore suddenly chuckled. “Your champion has been taken in by the familiars of Arcantos of Flame.”

“Familiars?”

“Yes, Arcantos of Flame sends his familiars out to take the measure of his opponents. They’re quite devious, actually. They sniff out strength, but if they smell weakness they attack and rip the opponent limb from limb.”

“Oh, no... But what about Eris?!”

“She, er... She must smell so strong to them that they’ve become entirely tame.”

Oh, no. They're so big and so fluffy! If they've taken a liking to Eris, there's no hope!

"Eh heh heh...heh." Arcantos chuckled, a little uncertain.
"Return to me, my familiars. She is beyond you, it seems... Heh heh. Now return to me. Return to me, I say. Come *on, return to me already...*"

Apparently, the familiars *really* liked Eris. They didn't react at all when Arcantos (I assumed that was the guy in black armor) called them.

Meanwhile, Eris looked like she'd died and gone to heaven. She was in a drooling state of bliss. Maybe it was only to be expected, but the familiars somehow also seemed delighted even though Eris was glomping them with all her might.

Huh, I wouldn't mind having a familiar or two that could withstand Eris around the house. It'd be a load off for Leo and Linia and Pursena.

After being thrown onto her butt again, Roxy stood up and turned to face Arcantos.

"Ugh...how cowardly. So this is how followers of the rumored Eccentric School of the North God Style fight."

"Who're you calling eccentric?! Don't lump me in with them! I wanted to see what kind of opponents you were, nothing more!"

"Yeah, right!"

Arcantos huffed. "As much as it irks me to be called an *Eccentric*...it matters not! Your champion is unable to defeat my familiars! You are weak!"

Are you just going to leave it there, Mr. Arcantos?

"Now it's just you, Magician... Well? If you surrender, I'll let you go. There's an old saying in my family that we should be kind to the Migurd Clan."

“If I...if I back down, who’ll save Rudeus?!”

“You are stout of heart!” Arcantos shouted, then put his sword in his mouth and got down on all fours, looking like a robot wolf. That was a North God Style four-legged stance. He dived at Roxy with terrifying speed.

Roxy reacted in an instant.

“Majestic blade of ice, I summon thee to strike my enemy down! Icicle Blade!” she cried, shortening the incantation. But she was up against Arcantos, one of Atofe’s Personal Guard. The black armor they wore was imbued with formidable magical resistance. Roxy’s Icicle Blade skidded off with a *clang*.

“Die!” he shouted.

Aaagh, watch out!

“Uwagh!” Arcantos went spinning away as an incredible force crashed into his side. He flew right off the edge of the arena platform.

Roxy, the other guards, and the shaggy familiars all stared after him in confusion. Then, they turned to look at me in unison.

“Ah, sorry about that, it slipped out...” I mumbled. Seeing Roxy in danger, I’d reacted with a stone cannon before I could stop myself. Usually, I at least yelled “Stone Cannon!” to give my allies a heads up that I was about to attack, but this time I’d done it totally non-vocally.

“Master Rudeus,” Moore sighed.

“I mean, what was I supposed to do?”

Come on, Roxy was in danger! I know you said before that no one’s going to get killed, but you can’t expect me to sit here and watch while Roxy weeps and writhes in agony as she clutches the stump of her arm. Even if she was ready to make the sacrifice!

“Oh well, I’ll allow it. Saving the hero when all seems lost is part of the princess’s role, after all.”

Phew. For the time being at least, we hadn’t flunked our Ultimate Four sequential battle. We weren’t about to be packed off for home without fighting Atofe.

“Actually, can I go down there? Or is there a battle with the dragon that guards the tower where the princess is imprisoned still to come or something?”

“That’s a good idea, but we’d have a hard time capturing a dragon...” Moore said. “Well, the princess is already out here and taking part in the fight. The rules are a bit fuzzy on that point, so I don’t see why not.”

A fuzzy area, huh?

Well, I wasn’t exactly a proper princess, and there’d been a *lot* of fuzzy areas in this whole process. This fight, for example. Half of the reason it even started was because I misspoke and then Atofe’s caprice. No point getting hung up on details this late in the game when none of them were clear to start with.

“Guess this is where I say goodbye,” I said.

“May you have fortune in battle,” Moore replied. “I have a few things to get ready.”

Ah right, after this Atofe takes the stage, I thought. I leapt down into the arena, then ran over to Roxy.

“Oh, Rudy...! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, I just got roped into Atofe’s little comedy act. What about you?” I asked, looking her over to make sure she wasn’t hurt. There were scorch marks on her robes, a few damp patches here and there, as well as burns and grazes on her face. She hadn’t taken any major injuries. Either that, or she’d healed herself.

“It’s been tough. The third one was especially strong—a mage knight who wielded fire and wind magic and attacked both Eris and me at once...”

I wished I’d seen that. I bet it was an epic battle. Roxy switched to using gestures to demonstrate just how powerful Peridot of the Earth had been.

Peridot...of the Earth. That’s the Magician who wielded fire and wind magic... Where did “earth” come from, then? Did fire and wind get taken by the others first? No, never mind. Not important.

Roxy told me that he was the strongest magician and swordsman of the Ultimate Four, experienced in doing battle against multiple opponents. His strategy had been to attack Eris with magic while targeting Roxy with his sword. Roxy was forced to counter the magic he sent at Eris, who didn’t have any magical resistance, while Eris had to protect Roxy, whose physical defense was poor. But Eris fought Sword God Style; defense wasn’t her strong suit. Unable to do anything more than protect the other, they found themselves slowly losing ground. But then Roxy had a flash of brilliance.

In theory, a counterspell cancels out the opponent’s spell, and it’s commonly held that a good counterspell uses precisely the same amount of force as the spell it blocks.

Roxy threw that common wisdom out the window. As she called up water magic to counter fire magic and earth magic to counter wind magic, she put far more power into them than the attacker’s spell. All that remained when it was over was water and earth, creating a huge volume of mud on the ground.

Then, Roxy used the combined spell Quagmire. In an instant, the mud on the ground became a bog, forcing Peridot to a standstill. That was when Eris went in for the kill—*bam!*

Nothing less from Roxy the Wise, I suppose.

Quagmire was my signature move, so you'd be forgiven for thinking that if only I'd been there, I could've won without the need to be so clever. You'd be wrong. If I'd used Quagmire off the bat, the opponent would've found a way to get around it. Peridot wasn't expecting Roxy to use the residue of her counterspells to attack, and that was how he ended up bogged down. There was no way I'd ever be that clever.

"But then when the next opponent came out, Eris..."

I looked over at Eris, and saw she was on the ground, twitching. Fearing that maybe the familiars had actually been poisonous, I rushed to her side.

"Aha...haha..." Eris stared into space, utterly blissed out. Her fingers were still making grabbing motions, still savoring the sensation of the familiars' fluff.

Poison, just as I'd thought.

Animals like that had a healing effect on Eris. They were practically a kind of medicine. Medicine can turn toxic when you take too much, though.

"Let's just get her thinking straight again," Roxy said.

An antidote? Or would it be better to use healing magic?

"Rudy, you groping her chest always gets her on her feet, right?"

"Huh?! You don't mind?"

"I *do* mind..." Roxy replied. "You should never touch a woman's body without consent. But Demon King Atofe is going to be here soon."

I followed Roxy's gaze. Atofe's personal guard had lined up, and Moore had a kind of brazier in his arms that he used to fill the area with smoke. The light from the bonfires illuminated the smoke. An ominous atmosphere filled the space.

They were getting the ambiance ready for the demon king's entrance. Unless we did something, we were going to have to fight without Eris. But no, crap, I had made a vow of celibacy... I couldn't yield!

"Come on, Rudy. When you're done, I'll let you touch mine too. As penance."

No, damnit, no! I must not yield... Then a thought hit me. "That's a tempting offer, but won't that end with her punching me and knocking me out? It won't help if we get Eris awake but I'm down for the count, right?"

"Oh... That's a fair point," Roxy admitted. Just then, Eris's body spasmed. She looked around frantically, her eyes cartoonishly wide.

"Where'd he go?!" she demanded.

"He's gone."

"Oh..." She looked a bit disappointed, but then, with a start, her eyes found me. She stared.

"Rudeus! You're okay!" She threw her arms around me. Her breasts pushed against my chest. They were so soft...

Heheheh, I didn't even have to cop a feel while she was in that trance. The twin peaks of Eris have fallen into my hands! Okay, not in my hands. They're too big.

"Atofe was just having a bit of fun. It was over quickly."

"Well that's good," Eris said. "But Rudeus, this is all your fault! You *had* to joke about being a 'princess!'"

"I sincerely regret it," I said, though there was nothing to regret.

I mean, I didn't know, did I? How was I supposed to guess that calling myself a princess would get me kidnapped? A normal demon king would kidnap a proper princess-y princess, not a random dude who just *called* himself one. Right?

Roxy tugged at the hem of my robe. “Um, Rudy? I was really worried too,” she said. It was so sweet, the way she said it. She’d even given me a proper “Are you okay?” earlier.

“I know, don’t worry,” I replied.

Right then, I felt really happy. I hadn’t been in any serious trouble, but Eris and Roxy were worried about me like I’d been fighting alongside them. They overcame those ordeals to save me... I guess this is what a princess feels like.

“Eheheh, hah, mwaaahaha, hah...”

A creepy laugh echoed behind us. It was deep and sounded far away, as though it were rising up from the pits of hell.

Turning, I found that the arena was already obscured from view by smoke. The sun had set now, and the bonfires had been extinguished, shrouding the scene in gloom.

The darkness wasn’t absolute.

A magic circle was glowing. Usually, magic circles glowed pale blue, but this one glowed purple. Maybe they used special paint. Maybe the effect of this magic circle was to “glow with purple light”?

The billows of smoke were illuminated by the purple light. It felt like some mega-celebrity was about to mount the stage.

Without a word, Eris stood up, her sword at the ready. I only got a quick glimpse of her face, but she looked absolutely hyped to see what would come out. Her excitement was kind of infectious.

It’s not going to be anything special, though. Just the jerk from earlier.

An echoing voice rang out across the arena.
“Mwaaahahahahahaha! You have broken through my most elite Ultimate Four, stationed throughout Fort Necross! You’ve done a great job to reach me on the other side!”

They weren't stationed anywhere in particular, I pointed out silently. But okay, never mind. All part of the show.

"Traversing the Demon Continent and laying siege to Fort Necross... Truly you are mighty to have made it here!

"I commend you! All of you are truly worthy to be called champions!"

Hey, you hear that, Eris? Now you've got an official certificate of champion-hood from the demon king. I think I also multiclassed into champion. Princess Champion Rudeus!

"You shall be rewarded!"

That was when I started taking things seriously. A wind picked up within the arena, blowing the smoke farther and farther away. At the same time, I felt a chill.

From the depths of where the smoke was being blown, I felt an all-encompassing, murderous aura. I gulped involuntarily. I even wondered what might emerge out of there. Even though there was only one candidate.

"Your reward..."

A sharp gust of wind blew, clearing the smoke away in seconds. With a *whoosh* all the bonfires burst back into flame, starkly illuminating the arena.

There in the center stood a woman. She had blue skin and white hair, and wings like a bat. A single thick horn protruded from her forehead. Though she was a little shorter than Eris, the battle-worn black armor she wore made her appear larger. She wielded a great sword that looked too heavy for her slender arms.

"The right to challenge me!"

There before us was Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe Rybak.

Chapter 10: Clash with Demon King Atofe

“I AM IMMORTAL DEMON KING Atoferatofe Rybak! If you defeat me I shall recognize you as champions! If you lose, you will serve as my puppets until the day you draw your last breath!”

Atofe radiated malice. A lone figure stood against her—the champion.

“I’m Sword King Eris Greyrat,” Eris declared. Facing down Atofe, she raised the Phoenix Dragon Sword, one of the Seven Sword God Blades, above her head.

“Sword God Style!” Atofe exclaimed happily. Without taking her eyes off Eris, she drew her own sword. “Just so you know, Sword of Light won’t work on me.”

Eris didn’t react. She knew. She’d heard the legend of the immortal demon kings.

Immortal Demon King Atofe couldn’t be beaten.

It wasn’t a question of technique—Atofe was slow and her blade was dull. She simply didn’t die. No attack, no mortal wound could kill her. No matter how much you hit her, she’d spring back up again. In the end, she’d win through sheer resilience.

That was Immortal Demon King Atofe. In the Laplace War, there were fewer than a dozen valiant warriors who’d been able to stand against her. The Three Godslayers stood among those few. The only individual to ever beat her one-on-one was the North God Kalman, or so the stories went.

Eris had assessed whether her strength was enough to topple the demon king, and she knew that the answer was no. Alone, it was impossible. The idea of challenging a being of legends was

exhilarating, but she knew there was no way she could beat Atofe with her own strength.

That didn't mean she was going to mope about it. She might not have the necessary ability, but someone else here did. They'd discussed it in advance.

"Hey, say something!" Atofe yelled.

Eris still didn't reply.

"Hold on," Atofe went on, "there was a guy like you who did the thing of concentrating all his energy and then coming at me with a single ultimate blow..." When Eris still didn't say anything she chuckled. "I've got a good memory, see. I remember it well. That blow never hit me. I squashed him with my fist, like a toad." Atofe snickered evilly, reminiscing, then glared at Eris. "Well, Eris Greyrat? This'll be the gamble of a lifetime for you. Will you humiliate yourself in front of your trusting companions...or will you obtain glory?"

She tapped her skull. "Here's my head, see? If you take it home you'll be the hero of humanity for all eternity!" Atofe was supremely confident. The look on her face said *No way this lady can kill me*.

Around us, her personal guards were wailing. Something like, "No, Lady Atofe! You're letting your guard down again!"

Allowing the hero to get the first swing in on purpose was an unavoidable part of what it meant to be a descendant of the immortal demon kings, I surmised.

"I don't need any glory," Eris said brusquely, "but I *am* going to cut your head off."

"Bold words, Eris Greyrat!" Atofe bellowed. Her voice thundered around the arena. "Come and try it!"

The evening sun sank behind the mountains and darkness settled. The two women were illuminated by the purple flames of the torches. Atofe's eyes blazed. Eris glared back at her, undaunted.

Their eyes were locked on to one another. Each one wanted the other dead.

Things could erupt at any moment.

“Um...”

Atofe’s personal guards weren’t looking at Eris or Atofe. Instead, their eyes were fixed on the giant behind Eris. There, in the dim light, stood a towering figure made of stone, standing about three meters tall. Where could it have come from? Had someone used summoning magic? But no, there were none of the aftereffects of that.

A few steps behind the giant stood the blue-haired magician. She clenched her fist in a clear declaration of success, looking up at the giant.

“Oh...” Why didn’t Eris, this savage Sword God Style warrior, attack? One of the guards understood, sighing with admiration: Eris was buying time so that Rudeus could get ready.

Roxy had summoned the Magic Armor Version One.

“Who...whoa...” Atofe, looking up at the shadowy figure behind Eris, made an awed noise. She recognized that armor from long ago, back before the Laplace War. She’d seen it in the Second Human-Demon War before it was sealed away. It looked a little different from how she remembered it. It was a new color. But such changes were trivial. Back then, there had once been many sets of armor like this one. This was a complete set.

“Fighting God Armor...!” Atofe muttered. She stared up at it, stunned—

“Gyaaaaaah!” And at that moment, Eris attacked.

Rudeus

E_{RIS'S SWORD} whistled through the air, following the shortest, straightest path to Atofe's neck while the demon king gaped up at the Magic Armor. The magic blade, like a beam of silver light, met its mark with all its lethal force intact, sliding into Atofe's flesh, then on through—

Alarm showed on Eris's face, and her sword stopped. It came to a halt around halfway through Atofe's neck.

Meanwhile, Atofe's sword was buried deep in Eris's right shoulder, and Eris's right arm wasn't moving.

She hadn't merely stopped. Someone had *stopped* her.

Sword of Light pierced right through between bones, essentially becoming a load-bearing beam within whatever body it penetrated. That was why it was renowned as the ultimate sword technique...and it had been blocked.

"Gyaaaaaah!" Eris immediately gave up on her right arm. Using only her left, she pulled her blade free. Normally, Sword of Light should have taken her opponent's head clean off. With just one hand, however, its power was reduced. A third of Atofe's neck remained unsevered, still firmly attached to her torso. That would mean death in any normal battle. Getting even a third of your neck sliced through would be a mortal wound. But Eris's opponent was Atofe. Immortal Demon King Atofe.

"Ngraaah!" Atofe looked like a corpse as she kicked Eris away. An awful *bwong* sound pealed as Eris went flying. Roxy caught her. Blood flowed freely from her shoulder; she stared at Atofe with unwavering murder in her eyes. She still wanted to fight, but her part was over for now.

Atofe howled a battle cry, then turned toward me. She held up her sword in a defensive stance, then leaned forward into a lunge as I readied my gatling gun. Maybe it was some animal instinct that

made her come for me when I still hadn't done anything; maybe it was based on experience.

With Eris out of the way, my line of fire was clear.

"Fire!" I shouted and unleashed a hail of stone cannons.

On my first step, Atofe's armor shattered into dust. On my second, her shoulders were shredded and her sword thrown up into the air. On my third, her torso, peppered with holes like a honeycomb, was blown off her pelvis.

There was no fourth step. Her remaining lower half lurched and fell. It was a heart-stopping scene. There was no blood—maybe because Atofe was an immortal demon king—but it would have been truly nauseating if there were. I still wasn't used to killing people. I never would be. I was only able to use the gatling gun at point-blank range because I knew she wouldn't die. That's right: even after this, Atofe wouldn't die.

Roxy applied healing magic to Eris's wound, then looked around anxiously at Atofe's personal guard. "Did we do it?"

Without Atofe around to give them orders, they wouldn't attack us. Not one of them was worried about Atofe. They had complete faith in their master's immortality.

"Not yet," I said, still on alert.

The guards muttered amongst themselves.

"Do we go next?"

"Nah, impossible."

"Keep your eyes down! Did you see that attack carve through black steel?"

"Armor won't do any good, huh? What even *was* that magic?"

"Last time he fought Lady Atofe he attacked with a super powerful stone cannon. It's probably that."

“Ah, that makes sense. So like a rapid-fire stone cannon?”

“So that means that...what is it, a staff? Is a magic weapon separate from the armor?”

They were analyzing the fight. Did nothing get them worked up? But then, I guess they knew it would take more than that to kill Atofe.

Atofe would regenerate. She was literally in the process of doing so right now. Scattered chunks of flesh flocked together to form bigger lumps, connecting up piece by piece until she was almost back to her original size. Unlike certain parasitic life forms, she could put herself back together even after you pulled her hair out...

Her life force was so strong it felt like it wouldn't matter if a few bits of her were left out from the whole, because any little lumps of flesh that remained would regenerate themselves through mitosis. A creature like that, wearing armor and training for battle... It was no wonder she was tough.

Atofe finished regenerating while I mused.

Because I'd riddled her with holes, her upper half was naked. Her abs—even more well-defined than Eris's—and her breasts—big, but not as big as Eris's—were on full display. Was there any point, I wondered, in a creature like her working out? I guess there was. Heck, there was probably more of a point to getting ripped when your cells couldn't die than there was for ordinary people. Intriguing.

When Atofe stood before me, fully restored and unarmed, I asked, “Do you still want to fight?” I'd come ready for a drawn-out battle where I'd use every skill at my disposal, but I hadn't come with hostile intent. If I decided Atofe, freshly regenerated, was too much hassle and seriously tried to imprison or exterminate her, Moore, who was watching from behind Atofe, would decide I was hostile. Having made that call, he would take command of Atofe's personal guard and attack me. That's what Orsted had told me. I had thought

about how to handle that eventuality...but I didn't want to resort to it. Her regeneration *was* a hassle, but beating her down every time she came back, as many times as it took to satisfy her, was the better option. I didn't know how many times that would be, but I'd fight her for as long as my magic held out.

But then Atofe yelled back, "No!"

Moore ran over and put a cloak over her. "I'll get you a change of armor at once, Lady Atofe," he said. Atofe huffed, then sat down on the ground with a thud, crossing her legs. Apparently, she wasn't going to fight. She stared resentfully up at me instead.

I was genuinely surprised. I was convinced the moment she was on her feet again she'd charge me like a wild boar or command her guards to attack us from all sides. Eris stood between the two of us, sword at the ready, but Atofe didn't spare her a single glance. Behind me, Roxy gripped her staff, but I doubted she'd get a chance to use it.

Atofe continued to stare at me for a long while without saying a word. After what felt like forever, she muttered, "Do you remember it, Moore?"

"I'm afraid I wasn't alive for the Great Human-Demon War," he replied.

"Oh, right. True." Her voice was quieter than I'd ever heard it. Calmer too. "It wasn't like that, back then. It was way flashier. It didn't have that weapon, but it was faster and stronger too."

Atofe had to be talking about the original Fighting God Armor—the ultimate suit of armor crafted by Laplace.

"But that's what humans were like. They were weak at first. Helpless as babies. They broke and fled the moment we attacked. But as time went on, they changed. New characters, new armor, new weapons. Even the way they fought. They gathered together and scattered apart, lay in wait in the mountains, and faced off across

rivers... And as they did so, little by little, they grew stronger. Kal used to say that that was the humans' strength." Atofe looked composed, and she actually sounded intelligent. Maybe immortal demon kings got sage-like post-regeneration, just like humans did after other activities.

"You made that?" she asked me.

"I did," I replied.

"Huh... You're strong, aren't you? Really strong," Atofe said. Her eyes looked bright and refreshed. "Funny. You pathetic humans are catching up to the Dragon Clan when even my father couldn't defeat them, no matter how he struggled." She stood up slowly, then ordered Moore to her side and looked up at me, where I was struggling to understand what she'd said. She folded her arms and went on. "I am defeated. As promised, I will join your cause, as long as you're still alive."

That's how Atofe became my ally. She also told me, "You beat me, Rudeus Greyrat, and so I name you 'champion.'"

So I became a champion too.

Later, there was a banquet at Atofe's fortress. A banquet to celebrate the death of the demon king, hosted by the vanquished demon king herself. Her personal guards were the waiters, and also the guests.

The vast training ground served as the banquet hall. The training dummies and gear were cleared away to make space for an arena in the center surrounded by leather mats. The guards sat around drinking and feasting. Demon King Atofe had been defeated, but that didn't mean any of her prisoners got to go free. Atofe probably

wouldn't understand if I brought it up, and besides, it was my problem if her personal guard got weaker from here on out. I decided to leave things as they were. This wasn't cops and robbers, after all. I couldn't free everyone. Well, okay, if any of them were desperate to go home, I'd look for a chance to sneak them out in turn. So long as I did it slowly, Atofe wouldn't notice.

Having said that, Atofe's personal guards all looked like they were happily enjoying the feast. None of them seemed about to rise up in revolt. I guess that made sense. It wasn't like they'd beaten Atofe themselves.

"This is a joyous day! We shall drink! We shall sing! And we shall fight!" Despite her defeat, Atofe was in high spirits. She was having a great time making her servants do battle in the central arena. I noted that with every cup of the ale I'd brought her, she bellowed, "Delicious!" She appreciated my present. It was a strange thought, but she reminded me of Badigadi in this moment. After a battle, her first priority was to drink and sing... Hey, they were siblings, after all. Maybe the Immortal Necross Lacross had been like this too.

"Ahahahaha, good!"

"Crush him!"

"Raise your guard! Come on! Raise it! Ahhh..."

They fought hand-to-hand in the arena. No weapons, no armor, just bare knuckles. The brawniest men in Atofe's personal guard pummeled each other with their fists, and it was all very macho.

Huh? Wait, never mind. That wasn't a guard. Or a man, for that matter.

"The victor is...Eris!" Eris stood in the arena. She must have had some fuel left to burn after the battle with Atofe. She was beating the crap out of a demon from Atofe's personal guard with the ferocity of a feral dog. This was after she fought Atofe's Ultimate Four earlier! The girl never stopped...

It was a good fight. The lizard-faced guard gave as good as she got. It was a sign of how elite Atofe's personal guards were. When you took away Eris's sword and had her fight hand-to-hand, however, the two were evenly matched. Unless one of them was holding back...but no, that wasn't it. Contestants lay sprawled unconscious around the edges of the arena. Eris had already beaten up three of them. She'd taken a few knocks, but Roxy was there as her second using healing magic. She'd be fine.

Eris had gotten a whole lot stronger...

Atofe cackled with delight. "You *are* a tough one! Just what you'd expect from the champion's comrade! All right, who's next? Who's it gonna be?"

"I challenge you, Demon King Atofe! Get down here and fight me!" Eris shouted. At this, Atofe cackled again.

"You're an even bigger moron than Kishirika, challenging me to unarmed combat! I like that! All right, I'll fight you!" She threw aside her cloak with a dramatic *swish*, then, still naked from the waist up, went down to the arena. The banquet approached its peak; the cheers were so loud it felt like the ground might split asunder. Who would win? Eris? Or Atofe?

The odds had to be on Atofe. Personally, I wouldn't put it past Eris to cause a major upset—

"Master Rudeus... Master Rudeus!"

"Ah! Sorry."

I wasn't at the banquet. I was sitting with Moore in a room in the fortress discussing what to do next. I ought to have been the guest of honor... The banquet was hitting a fever pitch out there. Who was the banquet in honor of, again?

Moore cleared his throat. "Thank you for the details. I have here a request for the search and extermination of the Man-God's disciple Geese and support in the fight against him, the search for Kishirika,

the establishment of an intelligence service, and support in the fight against the Demon God Laplace. Is that the extent of it?”

“That’s right.”

Unlike Atofe, Moore was a guy you could talk to. He’d heard my requests, put them in order, and was giving them due consideration. I wondered if maybe one day, long ago, Atofe’s brain had gotten a mind of its own, escaped the narrow confines of her skull, and turned into Moore.

“Setting aside the first two, for now, I doubt we’ll be able to help with the second two, especially the fight against Laplace.”

“Is it really impossible? Does she have some sort of obligation to Laplace...?”

“Lady Atofe lost to you and you alone. If you die that becomes null and void. Will you be alive in eighty years?”

“...Probably not.” At the end of the day, her debt was to me. Maybe I should have played it so she thought she’d lost to Roxy...well, it was too late for that now. Chalk it up to destiny.

“The mercenary company is also a problem,” Moore went on.

“Is it a territorial thing?”

“Lady Atofe reigns over this region, but her only subjects are her guards. If you want to set up another organization, that’s your prerogative, but they’ll have to look after themselves.”

“Very well,” I replied.

So Ruquag’s Mercenary Band was a no-go. We could set it up, but we’d always have to keep in mind that we were operating right next to an organization led by Atofe.

There would be problems. It wouldn’t be smarts that were needed to resolve them, but brute force, right then and there. I could imagine showing up and finding the whole thing gone up in smoke.

“To find Kishirika, we can send letters signed by Atofe to all the demon kings. Their Excellencies should be willing to assist with a search operation.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. You’re the one who’ll deliver them, Master Rudeus. We lack adequate information on the whereabouts of the teleportation circles.”

“But of course.”

Right, this guy knew about the teleportation circles. I didn’t have to hide them. Humans had banned the teleportation circles, but demons, especially the older ones, didn’t see them as especially taboo.

“Lady Kishirika won’t give you the run around unless she has a good reason to. I doubt it’ll take long to find her.”

“Yes, though faster is always better.”

“It’ll depend on how fast you deliver the letters... But I imagine you’ll find her within a year.”

As usual, no one knew where she was.

“Why do you think she’s always roaming around like that?”

“I would never presume to know what goes through the minds of old demons like her.”

“...Fair enough.”

From where I stood, Moore looked like an old demon too. I didn’t know how old he was, but he was an immortal demon, so we were talking well over a few centuries.

“You have grown much stronger, Master Rudeus,” Moore said. “You’re like a different man compared to when I saw you last.”

“That’s thanks to the Magic Armor.”

“You’re too modest.”

“It’s not modesty. I might have gotten hold of enough power to make Lady Atofe yield, but my personal strength hasn’t increased dramatically at all.”

“Strength” was something you could make, provided you combined magic and skill, but I didn’t come by that strength on my own. I’d had help from Zanoba, Cliff, and most recently Roxy. Without them, the Magic Armor would never have been completed and I could never have learned to operate it.

“You are only the second person to whose strength Lady Atofe has acknowledged after just one blow. The first was Lord Kalman, the first North God.”

“I don’t think I’m at the level of a Great Power.” If Atofe had kept fighting and resurrecting herself, I think I would have lost in the end. The Magic Armor burned a lot of energy and I only had so much magic in reserve.

“There’s nothing wrong with compensating for what you lack, whether it be skill, weapons, or allies. Lady Atofe recognizes it all. That’s why she always tells the challengers to come at her all together. That’s what makes humans strong, according to her.”

Humans’ strength was in...combining our powers? So using weapons and fighting alongside others were just different kinds of tactics and skills. There was no cowardly way to fight. That was how Atofe had come to accept her defeat, and why Moore was praising me now. I got it now. Kinda.

“But remember: Lady Atofe still has the skills of a North God Style warrior, and us, her personal guard. Don’t be fooled into thinking she fought you with no holds barred.”

“I’ll be sure not to forget.”

This time, I’d fought Atofe alone. But that was Atofe at her weakest. She was always drawing on the power of others to enhance her own. She would arm and armor herself, and she had her personal

guards. When she went into battle for real, she mobilized all of that against her opponent. She had plenty of strength in reserve, though where she planned to use all that power, I couldn't say. It was scary to think about. I remembered how the Rudeus from the future had been done in by Moore...

When I came here this time, I'd kept in mind the possibility that I'd have to fight the guards and prepared accordingly. Roxy had magic scrolls on hand for every contingency, which meant so long as we could hold Moore off for a few moments, we could have escaped. Thinking about it now, though, if the guards had joined the fray we might have been in serious trouble.

Just then, I heard Atofe yelling for Moore. "Moore! *Moore!* Bring Rudeus down here!" Her voice was so loud it easily traveled all the way up here. I looked out the window and saw Eris face down on the ground with Roxy rushing to her side.

She'd lost, then. Of course she had.

"Looks like I'd better go," I said. "If you need to get hold of me, use the contact tablet I set up earlier."

"I shall. One last thing, though." Moore picked up a box from beside him and held it out to me. It was about the size of a dictionary and engraved with devilish patterns. The kind of box that curses you when you open it. I took it and found it was unexpectedly light.

"Lady Atofe told me to give this to you," Moore said.

"What is it...?"

"Should you find yourself in a desperate situation, open it. I am sure you will find it useful."

So you're saying, "It's a surprise"?

"Let's be off, shall we?" Moore said.

"Sounds good." I put the box in my pack, and we left the room.

After that, I was shown to a seat next to Atofe with the best view in the house of the arena. Wine flowed freely as the banquet continued. We were shown a five-on-five team battle between the guards, followed by a ridiculously flashy magic display by Moore and a few others. Then came an acrobatics show like a Chinese circus, followed by a bard who sang for us.

I found it difficult to enjoy any of it. Atofe sat next to me the whole time, still naked from the waist up. I didn't know where to look. Rudeus the Celibate's celibacy, you see, had only made him hornier.

I stole a peek, but I hadn't noticed that Eris had sat down next to me. She grabbed my ear and Roxy, who plopped down on my lap, blocked off my view of Atofe.

It was a great banquet.

Interlude: We Got Married

IN THE MIDDLE of a cluster of ten or so houses stood a rough fence around a little vegetable garden, and in the corner of that garden was a patch of Pir*nha Plants. Junior high students crowded around a giant cooking pot. They looked the same as they had ever been, just like a memory.

“I wonder if Dad’s doing okay.”

“Yeah, I dunno...”

In the Migurd Village, it was as though time stood still.

Two months had passed since I convinced Atofe to join me. I’d used that time to deliver letters to all the demon kings. I trudged from one end of the Demon Continent to the other bearing letters from Atofe along with Orsted’s recommended offerings, forging alliances with the sweat of my brow... Okay, well, I used the teleportation circles, but you know.

The demon kings were a diverse bunch. There was the Plundering Demon King Baglahagla, a gourmand who looked like a pig, then the Face Demon King Lynebyne who was literally a disembodied face, like those Moai statues. After that there was the Demon King of Light Samedynometry, whose whole body constantly shone, then the Bewitching Demon King Patorsetor whose translucent body was concealed under sheer robes. Plenty more besides.

Every time, I went in ready to fight if I had to. These were demon kings, you know? An association of morons with Atoferatofe and Badigadi at the top. I had no hope in hell that they’d listen to me.

At least, that's what I expected, but they turned out to be unexpectedly easy to talk to.

They accepted their presents grinning like kids on Christmas, and then when I gave them Atofe's letter, they turned pale and whispered, "A champion," bowing their heads and averting their eyes.

One even wet himself while pleading for his life.

The Vile Demon King Qeblaqabla did the same. Orsted told me to be particularly careful with him. He was a sphere full of holes, and every hole constantly emitted the smell of vomit. Vile as he was, he was also looking for a fight. Even he bowed down the moment I said Atofe's name, though.

I now understood both how feared Atofe was, and how unusual.

The demon kings, in general, seemed like a bunch of easygoing guys doing their own thing. Each one listened earnestly to my requests and heard me out regarding my search for Kishirika. Eighty years from now was another story; most said it was too far off for them to promise anything. Demon kings live a long time. I doubted they thought much about the future.

We also dropped in on Rikarisu along the way—the location of Kishirika's castle, currently ruled by Badigadi. It was a crater that had once been Kishirika's stronghold.

Badigadi wasn't home. I checked in with the soldiers, who all shrugged and said he hadn't been back even once. They said he was likely off wandering somewhere.

I handed Atofe's letter over to the soldiers watching the castle in his absence, just in case, and asked them to look for both Kishirika and Badigadi. There were only a few demon king castles left. We were apparently going to get through this without any problems.

Then Roxy came to me. “Would it be all right if I stopped in to say hello in my hometown?” she asked. “Don’t worry, it won’t take long. I’ll go by myself and be back before you know it.”

No way was I letting her go alone. I went straight back to the house, picked up Lara as well as Roxy’s betrothal gift, then returned to Rikarisu.

I’d had a hunch this might happen. I was ready.

Three days later, our journey came to an end as we arrived at the Migurd village.

Me, Roxy, and Lara. Eris muttered something about not wanting to get in the way and tapped out, though she did say to pass on her thanks for the sword. To think, Eris had learned tact. I could’ve teared up.

When Roxy’s mother Rokari saw her daughter, she froze.

Well, not at *Roxy*, specifically. It was when she saw Roxy with a child in her arms and me standing beside her, the picture of a happily married couple, that she froze.

A few people in the village had stared intensely at Roxy. I’d wondered if they were sending telepathic messages, but Rokari was different. Her brain had obviously ground to a halt, and she along with it.

She stayed completely still for about five seconds.

Then Roxy said, “I’m home, Mom,” and she twitched.

“R-Roxy, is this...” she stammered, “and this child...?”

“My husband and daughter,” Roxy replied.

For a moment, Rokari looked shocked, but then her expression changed to one of delight. She turned this way and that, looking all around her. Almost at once, I saw all the nearby Migurd turn towards us, so she must have yelled something with telepathy. Maybe she called Rowin, Roxy's father.

Oh my goodness, dear! Roxy's brought a man home!

Something like that.

Silence fell. It was uncomfortable, everyone staring without saying anything. But I was Roxy's husband. I couldn't let any embarrassment show. I folded my arms, planted my feet apart, and stuck out my chest. Then, I channeled Psycho Power...

"Mom, is Dad around?" Roxy asked.

"Um, yes. I just called him. He's at the elder's house..." Rokari replied. "I'm sure he'll be here soon."

"Could we please wait inside, then? There are too many people staring, and it's getting to Rudy. Look at the weird pose he's pulling."

Say what?! This isn't "weird"! This is the pose of an evil dictator of noble heritage, I'll have you know.

"All right, Rudy. Let's go in," Roxy said. I grunted my assent and followed her into the house.

Was it the pressure of introducing myself to my in-laws after this that made my pack feel so heavy? I'd rather blame it on that than my beloved Roxy's insults for the pose I'd tried so hard at.

"Thank you for having me," I said as I followed Roxy and her mother into the house, away from the prying eyes. Thinking back, the last time we were here we didn't go into this house. Maybe I could get Roxy to show me her old room and her high school graduation photos.

Yes, yes, I know they don't have those things in this village.

"I wonder if we have any provisions stocked," Rokari mused out loud.

"Don't worry," Roxy said. "We won't stay long."

"But Roxy, my dear, you've come all this way. You mustn't just hurry away again." Rokari sounded forlorn.

I sat down next to the hearth. Roxy promptly sat down next to me, saying, "I'm afraid we're very busy, Mom."

"Oh." Rokari looked disappointed.

I thought we could probably spare three or four days to stay if she wanted... But I knew Roxy didn't much care for her hometown, so a longer stay wasn't on the cards.

"Anyway, Roxy. This is very sudden, you coming back...and with such a nice man..." Rokari looked back to me and, without reserve, slowly looked me over from my toes up to my head. Then she gave a little gasp of realization and bowed. "How rude of me! I'm Rokari, Roxy's mother. It's a pleasure to meet you."

To...meet me...?

She didn't remember the time we'd met ten years earlier.

"My name is Rudeus Greyrat. I believe we have met once before," I replied.

"Have we really...?"

"Yes, around ten years ago. Ruijerd brought me here," I explained.

"You're a friend of Ruijerd Superdia? But the last time Ruijerd was here..." Rokari put a hand to her mouth as she thought back. Then it seemed to click. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Are you the little human Ruijerd had with him when he left on his journey?"

"Yes, that was me."

“Dear me...! Oh, that does take me back! Haven’t you grown? It’s barely been ten years, but I suppose humans must become full-fledged adults when they get as big as you are.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m doing my best to stand on my own two feet, though I have a long way to go...” Here, I placed my hands on the floor and bowed my head. “I’m sorry the announcement comes so late. I have married your daughter.”

“...I see. Is she, um, are you happy with her?”

“I am very happy with her.” I looked over at Roxy. She was bright red.

“Is Roxy, ah, behaving herself properly as a human bride? There’s a lot of tension between humans and demons, isn’t there? She isn’t causing you any trouble?”

“Not only is she doing very well, but she’s also constantly getting me out of trouble. She’s the most reliable person in the whole family.”

“Well, that’s...good...” Rokari said, though she still sounded doubtful.

Roxy jabbed me in the side. I looked at her questioningly, and she muttered, “Too much praise.”

I wasn’t exaggerating anything! I *did* rely on her.

“It’s just, you seem like such a fine young man... Are you *sure* you’re happy with our Roxy?”

The same question again. Rokari was flustered too.

Roxy butted in. “Rudy has two other wives. I’m more like his mistress. So even if I’m not totally satisfactory, it’s not a problem.”

There was nothing unsatisfactory about Roxy, and I’d never once treated her like a mistress.

“I see... Still, though...”

“Mom, can you stop? You’re embarrassing me.”

“Oh...yes. I just worry, dear. You were always so unfriendly and quiet, not to mention your manners.”

“I’m aware of my weak points, Mom. But look, I’m fulfilling my duties as a wife. I even had a child.”

Duties? Very businesslike. But I’d still love you just as much even if you couldn’t have children. Maybe I should say something.

“Rudeus, is that true?” Rokari asked.

“It is. At the very least, I’ll never stop loving Roxy. I’d swear that to any god you like.”

My love was *agape*. It knew no limits.

“Is that right...?” Rokari said, still troubled. Maybe showing her through actions would work better. If I just put my arm around Roxy, like so... *Oops, she grabbed my wrist. It’s not that, Roxy, I’m not trying to touch your butt*, I thought, but then I realized she was squeezing my hand. Her fingers were warm.

Rokari seemed convinced. “I suppose it is,” she said. Just then, Lara, who sat beside Roxy, turned to look outside.

“Ah! Rowin is back,” Rokari said. My father-in-law was about to make his entrance, which meant it was time to make my introductions once again. I plucked up my courage. I’d grovel on my hands and knees if I had to.

Introductions with Rowin went without a hitch. He reacted just like Rokari and said pretty much the same things, so I gave him the same answers. It was a simple operation. No need for groveling.

“Well, Roxy, congratulations,” Rowin said at last, choking up a bit. “So long as you’re happy, that’s all that matters.” He squeezed her hand.

“Thank you, Dad,” Roxy replied. She and Rokari were getting teary as well, and watching them, I felt my own emotions welling up. Could I make Roxy happy? What was happiness, really? I didn’t have an answer, but I’d do my best to make sure our love never faded.

“Ah, dear. My Roxy, married...” Rowin said. “You were always tripping over your own feet and bursting into tears ever since you were little. And now here you are...”

“Dad, please don’t talk about that in front of Rudy.”

Roxy when she was a little kid...! I bet she was adorable. I mean, she probably looked more or less the same as she did now, so obviously she was adorable. I assumed she talked more like a little kid back then. If we’d met back then and grown up together, things might have turned out pretty different... But no matter what kind of relationship we had, I was sure I would always respect her.

“And here,” Rowin went on, sounding emotional, “I never thought I’d get to meet my grandchild.” Even after Roxy reproached him, he picked up Lara in his arms, looking delighted. Lara, as usual, didn’t protest. She just stared at him, wide-eyed. He smiled at her.

“Lara, is it? Aren’t you a clever girl, already knowing how to say your name.”

“Huh?” Roxy and I exclaimed together. We hadn’t told them Lara’s name. And Lara hadn’t said anything.

How did he... I thought, but then Roxy turned to Rowin with amazement.

“Is our daughter... Can she use telepathy?” she demanded.

“Eh? Yeah, she still stumbles a bit, but she can get across what she wants just fine,” Rowin replied.

I looked at Roxy. A shocking truth had been exposed. Our daughter was a psychic.

Okay, thinking about it, it wasn't that shocking. Roxy couldn't use telepathy, but both her parents could. It probably wasn't down to genetics that Roxy couldn't communicate that way.

"Didn't you know?" Rowin asked.

"No one else in the family is telepathic," Roxy replied.

Rowin frowned. "Are you sure? Lara here says her grandma talks to her all the time."

Her grandma. Lara's grandma, so...Rokari? That wasn't right.

She meant Zenith.

"Oh..."

It clicked for Roxy and me at the same time. This was what the Blessed Child had talked about. Zenith could read minds. And the Lara in her memories was a chatterbox. Lara was always silent and sullen, but Zenith remembered talking away happily with her. So it had been telepathy. Lara had been talking with telepathy the whole time.

I felt a wave of relief. Roxy didn't seem to be taking it the same way, though. She was frowning at the ground. I could imagine what was going through her mind: *Even my daughter is a telepath. Why am I the only one who isn't?*

The atmosphere in the room darkened.

"Is she really? Um, okay then..." I stood up and went over to stroke Lara's hair, saying, "Laaara! It's your papa!"

Lara didn't smile. She just stared at me. What was she saying?

"She says, 'I don't understand,'" Rowin translated.

Say what? ...Oh, right. That was demon tongue.

I tried again, this time in human tongue. “Laaara, it’s your papa.” Then I looked expectantly at Rowin.

“She says, ‘I know,’” he said.

Oh, she knows, does she? Well, I supposed there was no way she wouldn’t. I did tell her all the time.

Still, her response was a bit cold. She could have at least indulged me with an “I love you, Papa!” or something. Lucie used that line just yesterday.

But then, telepathy wasn’t the same as language. It probably came across differently from how it sounded out loud. Yeah, that had to be it, or she’d hardly be able to talk to Zenith.

“Well, that’s a relief,” I said. “I was worried that she had some delays.”

“She’s still too little to talk except inside her head, but she’ll start talking out loud soon,” Rowin reassured me with a nostalgic smile. “Right now, I bet you two feel just like we did when Rokari had Roxy.”

“How so?” I asked.

“When Roxy was born, we thought that because she couldn’t speak, she wasn’t developing properly.”

Just like Roxy was the only one in her family who couldn’t use telepathy, Lara was the only one in her family who couldn’t speak. They were similar in that way. Like mother, like daughter.

For now, all I felt was relief. Our daughter was growing up just fine. If there were no one at home for her to talk to, that might have been a problem. But it wasn’t like that. There was Zenith, who I was certain about, and I had my suspicions that Leo used some telepathy-like power to talk to Lara as well. Once she started using words, she could communicate with everyone else too. She just needed a little longer.

“Lara looks exactly like Roxy, doesn’t she?” I said.

Rowin laughed good-naturedly. “She does, yeah? The spitting image. Especially her eyes.”

Rokari looked like she was enjoying herself too. And maybe it was just my imagination, but I thought Lara looked the same.

After that, we returned the money we’d borrowed ten times over, I presented my betrothal gift to them, and then we sat down for a meal of Giant Rock Turtle. It was the first time I’d eaten it in ages, and I made sure to enthuse over how delicious it was while hiding my urge to gag. We had a lovely time. I was thinking how glad I was we’d come when I noticed something: Roxy didn’t look happy at all. She didn’t smile once the whole time.

Roxy and I ended up staying that night in the village. Perhaps in consideration of the fact that we were a married couple, her parents put us up in an empty house nearby.

The house was still a bit dusty, so we did a brief spot of cleaning and then lay down to sleep, all three of us side by side. It felt a bit like a scene in a movie where the couple shows up at the hotel and there’s only one bed with the pillows side by side, something cheesy like that. But we couldn’t do anything with Lara here and besides, I was Rudeus the Celibate now. I could get through a night without touching Roxy, even with her sleeping right beside me.

When I saw her lying there though, her eyes closed, I couldn’t help it. Those feelings just rose up. I started thinking, *Just a little touch would be all right...*

Think about it for a second. For the time being, I’d embarked upon the path of celibacy to ensure none of my wives got pregnant.

Put another way, anything was fair game so long as no one got pregnant. Just blowing off some pent-up urges wouldn't affect anyone's destiny. Roxy wasn't in any danger.

Glad we cleared that up. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll—
"Rudy."

Aiaaah! I'm sorry! It was a passing thought! I didn't think you'd mind a little touch... But no, you're right! I'm Rudeus the Celibate! Rudeus the Celibate would never permit such a thing!

"Are you still awake?" Roxy asked.

"Hooonk...shooo..."

"Don't pretend to be asleep. Our eyes just met."

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes. Roxy lay there, looking at me. Her eyes were serious.

"It's about Lara," she said.

Lara's breathing told me she was already fast asleep. She looked like an angel when she slept, a far cry from her usual expression of defiance.

"The truth is, I suspected this might be what was happening," Roxy explained. I didn't have to ask what. She meant what we'd talked about today. Lara's possession of the Migurd ability.

"I didn't say anything until now, but...whenever I saw Lara and Zenith looking into each other's eyes, I considered the possibility."

"It never occurred to me at all."

"Why would it? You've been so busy these past few years, running around everywhere." She may as well have said, *You haven't paid any attention to your children.*

When you put it that way, maybe she had a point. Maybe I only paid attention to the sweet side of my children. I didn't help to care for them or bring them up. Honestly, I'd taken advantage of Sylphie and Roxy.

“Don’t make that face,” Roxy said. “I’m not blaming you in the slightest.”

It was kind of her to say so. It didn’t matter how much I agonized or repented—right now, my hands were full dealing with the Man-God. I didn’t have anything left over for looking after the kids.

Roxy gently stroked Lara’s face. “I just had this thought. I was born in this village, and for as long as I can remember, I felt like an outsider.”

When I didn’t reply, she went on. “Looking back now, it was hard. When I left home, I went to a town where people used words to communicate. It wasn’t until I got to know people there and started my life as an adventurer that I really felt like I was living in *my* world.”

She couldn’t do what everyone else around her could. Life was simple for them, but not for her. When they asked her why she couldn’t do this thing that ought to come naturally, she had no answer. All she could do was go on being seen as a useless burden by those around her until she began to believe it herself.

Just because everyone else could do it, though, that didn’t mean it came naturally. It turned out she could make do without it. The sense of freedom Roxy got when she realized that must have been incredible.

“What if by raising Lara this way, we end up putting her through that? I was fine once I left home, but that won’t work for her. The Migurd are the only ones with this power.” Roxy looked away from me.

She might be right. The Migurd Clan rarely left this village. Even on the Demon Continent you hardly ever saw one. They didn’t exclude others, but they were reclusive. It was all too possible that one day, Lara might start to feel like an outsider.

“So this is what I thought.” Roxy frowned like she wasn’t sure about what she was about to say. She didn’t look at me. “What if we left her with my mom and dad for them to look after her?”

“...What?”

“I thought that maybe it’d be better for her to live here amongst the Migurd until she’s grown up a bit more. Maybe until she’s ten or fifteen. After that, she can decide for herself whether to leave the village or remain here.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to keep my son and my daughters as close as possible. That was the obligation you took on when you had a child; it was part and parcel of being a responsible parent. Even making allowances for the Man-God, I wanted to bring up Lara where I could see her.

But Roxy had thought this through properly before bringing it up. Her words weren’t rooted in wanting to escape her obligations or give up on raising her child. She saw how hard this was on Lara, and she hated the idea of making her daughter go through what she had.

There was no way that Lara, with her blue hair and her ability to communicate in ways that others couldn’t, would go through life without experiencing any hardship. And parents can’t protect their children from all bad things.

“I don’t like it,” I began, “but, if you think it’s the right thing, I’ll...” I stopped, unable to get the words out. I couldn’t decide. Should I put my feelings first, or Roxy’s proposal? I didn’t know what to say, so I simply shut my mouth.

The silence stretched on until Roxy said, “I’m sorry, Rudy. Let’s pretend I never said anything. Please, just forget about it.”

With that, the day drew to a close. Roxy and I fell asleep hand in hand.

The Migurd village was quiet. You didn't hear any voices. The villagers all communicated with telepathy, so there was no need for conversation. Some of the children might have said hello to Roxy, but she couldn't hear them. I suppose Lara could. She could probably hear the people over there getting food ready, and the lovers' quarrels from inside the houses, and all the other hustle and bustle.

"Seeing how little has changed here, it makes me realize how full these last ten years have been," Roxy mused. "Or, I suppose, how rushed human lives are." She looked down at her daughter in her arms. Lara stared back at her with her customary sullen stare. Given another ten years, this village would likely look much the same. Or if it did change, it wouldn't be in ways that we could see.

Rowin and Rokari both came to the entrance to the village to see us off. They were sad to see us leave.

"You take care now," said Rowin.

"I wish you'd stay a bit longer..." added Rokari.

"Mind if I give Lara another cuddle before you go?" Rowin held out his arms. It was probably true that grandparents favored their first grandchild in every world. These two looked like they were finished having children of their own.

"Of course not. Here." Roxy held Lara out to him, then made a noise of surprise as Lara grabbed hold of the collar of Roxy's robe. I recognized that gesture.

"Come on, Lara," she tried. "Say goodbye to your granny and grandpa."

Lara didn't react. She had all four of her limbs wrapped tight around Roxy like a cicada. Then, without letting go, she turned to look at me. Her expression was the same as ever, sullen and defiant.

Her mouth turned down, her brow furrowed, and she looked ready to burst into tears. It was like she was asking for help.

“Oh, dear... Hahaha, don’t worry about it then,” Rowin said, waving his hand with an awkward smile. “She says she doesn’t want to leave her mommy.”

Roxy looked at Lara in astonishment. Then, seeing her daughter on the verge of tears, her expression changed to anxiety.

Lara broke the silence. “No. I wanna be with mommy...” The effort it took her was clear in every word.

Our daughter, who’d barely said two words till now, was asserting herself for the first time.

Maybe, I thought, Lara had been listening to us last night. Or maybe she hadn’t been listening, but hearing our conversation had given her dreams about being left behind. If so, we’d made her worry for nothing.

“It’s okay,” Roxy said, hugging Lara to her. Her mouth was tight as she struggled not to cry. “I’ll never leave you.”



The worry left Lara's face, and she relaxed.

"Roxy, when do you think you'll be back?" Rokari asked.

"Good question. I think it'll be once Lara's grown up some more, so perhaps...another ten years or so."

"All right, dear. You take care of yourself, now."

Rokari's reply was matter-of-fact. Ten years wasn't a long time to her, I figured.

With that, we departed the village. Roxy's parents stood at the entrance to the village until we were out of sight. Though the visit had been a bit awkward at times, I was glad to have met them properly.

Eris and Sylphie's parents were all dead. Roxy wasn't close to hers, but still. Family was family. I hoped to keep up our acquaintance for many years to come.

"Well, Rudy. Things are about to get busy again," Roxy said.

"Yeah," I replied.

But first, I thought, I have to take care of the task in front of me.

We set off back to Rikarisu.

Chapter 11: Number Four

WE FINISHED MAKING our introductions to all the demon kings. All of them promised to ally with me. I also had them sign contracts, just in case. Atofe's name was really handy.

Right now, everything was on track. Things were going well—there were so few hiccups that it felt like things were going a little *too* well. Geese's continued silence was beginning to creep me out, not to mention the lack of interference from the Man-God. I returned home regularly to check on my family, but there was no indication of him meddling there, either.

I went through all the information the mercenary company had gathered from all over the world but nothing stirred my doubts. That had to mean that whatever Geese was plotting, nothing I was up to interfered with them. Maybe the letter had been a bluff, and his actual scheme was different... But what that meant in the long term, I had no idea. For the time being, I had no choice but to stay the course I'd set.

Geese's whereabouts were similarly shrouded in mystery. He was doing a good job of keeping his head down. To tell the truth, I had the feeling that, short of asking Kishirika, we wouldn't find him. But I had been putting out wanted notices for her all over the Demon Continent. It was just a matter of time until we found her.

In the meantime, I decided to make inroads with my next target. I was heading to the Sword Sanctum to see Sword God Gall Falion.

Orsted said he was a good-natured guy whose hobby was collecting rare swords. Eris, however, said he wasn't the type of man who listened.

I had met Sword King Nina Farion before...but I expected Gall to be cut from a similar mold to Atofe. Depending on how things went, I

might end up having to bulldoze my way through negotiations with the Magic Armor again. I wanted people with me who could fight if things wound up like that. However, my destination was full of people comparable to Eris and Ghislaine in skills—they wouldn't stay on the sidelines like Atofe's personal guard if they saw their boss taken down. I'd have to fight off a whole horde of swordsmen at once (and they'd be Saint-tier...). That thought didn't do wonders for my motivation. I felt a stomach ache coming on from considering it.

I'd bring Eris, at least...but who else? Maybe I could cajole Ariel into letting me take Ghislaine along.

"My dear! If you don't hurry up and finish, I can't wash up!"

"Yeah, sorry. I'm eating. Nom nom."

Right now, however, I was at home, eating dinner with my "wife."

"You better not leave the peppers!"

"What, not the peppers too? You know I don't like them..."

"You will eat them! You're a grown-up, so you have to be brave and eat things you don't like!"

My long-suffering "wife" was still only five years old. Our house didn't have a roof, and our plates were made from rocks. On them were arranged mud dumplings and mud gravy. If only I earned more at work, we could afford better! I'd push myself harder.

"Goo."

"Oh, Norn! You're hungry again? Mommy just fed you! I suppose you can have some more."

Our daughter was fifteen, nearly sixteen. This year, she would graduate from the University of Magic. That meant organizing all kinds of events that kept her perpetually busy, but I guess she still missed her mommy's milk sometimes.

"Yaaay, thanks, Mommy," Norn said.

“No, you’re the baby, so you only speak in baby talk!”

“Oh... Um, goo goo.”

Our daughter hadn’t started talking yet. I guess that was normal, given that she was still breastfeeding.

“Woof woof!”

“Aisha, are you hungry too? Fine, I’ll feed you. Here’s your dinner. It’s a secret, okay?”

Our pet dog was fifteen too. She was a career-focused woman juggling her household duties with her job at the mercenary company. But, in the end, even she was a slave to her stomach. Just like a dog.

“Rrruff!”

“Once you’re finished, you go play with Norn!”

“Ruff ruff, woof!”

“Gagooo...”

“Wah, that tickles!”

The dog, getting overexcited like she was in heat, flung her arms around my wife and daughter and started licking their faces. What a happy family. I wanted to join in too.

“Oooh, let Dada in too!”

“No! Dada doesn’t do that!” my wife said firmly. This felt like an example of domestic discrimination. Perhaps, despite looking like a happy family on the surface, our marriage was actually loveless. We’d fallen out of love into a rut of marital ennui.

More to the point, how come I didn’t get to be the pet? I wanted to hug and lick everyone too...

“You hate me...” I sniffled.

“No, I don’t! Dada’s an amazing person! Even though he hardly ever comes home, and he can’t ever cuddle the baby, he still loves them very much! It’s not his fault!”

Amazing is all very well, but I’d rather be here, near you all. My fault or not, I want to cuddle my children too. All that love breeds warmth, and in that warmth, there’s happiness.

“Um, Rudy...?” A voice came from behind me. “Could I have a word?” I turned and saw my mother-in-law peering out of the window of the neighboring house... Ah, forget it. That’s enough of the game.

“Sure,” I said. I went to stand up but felt a tug on my sleeve. Lucie looked up at me, anxiety on her face.

“Are you going back to work already, Dada?”

This had all started around an hour earlier. I’d been brooding over who to take with me to the Sword Sanctum, or whether I should just get CEO Orsted to make an appearance, as well as how to go about negotiating and whether I should show up prepared for a fight... That was when Lucie showed up with Norn in tow.

She’d hidden behind Norn as she hesitantly asked, “Dada...um, can we play?”

I agreed right away. Gall Falion? The Sword Sanctum? Who cared about trifles like that?

“No, Lucie, I’m just going to talk to Mommy.”

“...I want you to stay.”

“I’ll come back soon as we’re finished, sweetie. You play with your big sisters till then, okay?”

“...Okay,” Lucie said, her little mouth puckered as she looked down at the ground. It took all I had to tear myself away.

If I could, I’d play house with you all day long. But my real wife’s calling me now, so I gotta go.

I washed my hands, then went back to the living room and sat myself down on the couch next to Sylphie.

“Okay, what’s the matter?”

“Well, it’s just... You’re busy at the moment, right, Rudy? So I don’t want to put pressure on you, but I have to ask beforehand...” Sylphie scratched at her cheek, looking down in embarrassment.

What’s with the teasing?

“I mean, you’re about to set off to the Sword Sanctum any day now, right?”

“Yeah, as soon as everything’s ready, so another two or three days...”

All that was left to do was to choose my team. Eris and one other. I wanted someone who spoke the language of the Sword God Style gang. Hey, there was a thought! Ariel had Isolde working for her as well. Isolde had trained at the Sword God’s Sanctum too, so she was a possibility.

“How long will you be gone?” Sylphie asked.

“I’m not sure, but probably somewhere between ten days and a month. We’ll drop in to see a few other people while we’re in the area, I’m guessing.” There were supposed to be renowned swordsmen and smiths in training around the Sword Sanctum, so I intended to make some connections.

“Right... Okay, so I guess you won’t be back in time.”

“In time for what?”

“The baby,” she said. My eyes went to her belly. It was big and swollen. Her breasts were a bit bigger too. Sylphie was so slender that the changes looked strange on her.

“Oh... It’s that time already, huh?”

Look, I hadn't forgotten. Duh. Sylphie was always in my thoughts. I just didn't know the due date... But all right. It was coming soon. Time really does fly.

Hesitantly, Sylphie asked, "Do you want to touch my belly?"

I reached out and laid my hand on her stomach. Even though I was only touching the outside, I felt the pulse of the life inside of her. It was strange, almost like she had two hearts.

Which she did. Right now, Sylphie held two lives within her. And soon, one of them would break away to exist on its own.

"Lucie and the others' new little brother or sister will be here soon," Sylphie said, laying her hand on top of mine. "You won't be here for the birth this time, will you, Rudy?"

"Yes, I will. I'll be home."

"But Rudy..."

"I'll be here," I said firmly. After being told our baby would be born soon, I couldn't just say "Well, good luck!" and leave. If I did that, what would be the point of the work I'd been doing?

"Thank you, Rudy. I love you."

"I love you too."

Sylphie closed her eyes, so I moved my hand up to her shoulder and pulled her close. Times like these were when I felt truly happy.

"There's one other thing, while I remember," Sylphie said. "Before the baby's born, I wondered if you could think of a name. You said you'd think about it before you went to Millis, but you still haven't told me."

I slid down onto the floor to sit with my legs folded under me.

And so I wound up staying home for a while longer. My sense of urgency was as strong as ever, but now I was worried. I knelt on the floor before Sylphie, bowed my head to the ground, and admitted that I hadn't thought about the name. She wasn't angry or even annoyed. Instead, she went quiet and pale. I could see the betrayal on her face.

It vanished again in an instant as she said, "Oh, Rudy. You'd better start thinking now, then," but I'd seen it. I'd seen the crushing disappointment. Right afterward, the thought came to me that maybe I'd exhausted her patience with me. I think I probably had.

For the past half year, Sylphie had believed in me, sure that, though I might be far away, I couldn't wait for the birth of our child. That I'd celebrate happily with her after the event. That's what I thought I'd be doing too, of course. I mean, I'd had every intention of it. Obviously, I hadn't shown it through my actions.

"Dada, what's wrong? Does your tummy hurt?"

"No, sweetie. I just hurt Mama's feelings a little bit."

"Then you gotta say sorry," Lucie advised me. Succinct, and the right thing to do. Unfortunately, I didn't think it was an apology Sylphie wanted. It wasn't just a surface-level "sorry" she was after, but something more complicated, less clearly defined... Yeah, she wanted peace of mind.

"The thing is, Lucie, even if I say 'sorry' to Mama now, she'll worry that I might hurt her feelings again."

"But you won't, will you?"

"I won't. I'll do my best not to."

"Then Mama will forgive you!"

Sylphie understood from the start. She knew with how much time I spent away that every now and then, I'd forget something altogether. That didn't make it any easier for her to swallow, though.

She'd held back her temper for a long time. The time I'd gone off to find Paul right after she got pregnant, the time I married Roxy, the time I married Eris—she never blew up at me, and she was always understanding. She let me do as I pleased.

When I said I hadn't thought of a name, she held back then, too. She must have forced back what she really wanted to say. And she'd keep on doing it. I'd keep making her do it.

We were fine, for now. But one day, she'd reach the limit of what she could put up with. Like a glass of water filled past its brim, one day she wouldn't be able to hold anymore, and when that happened, I'd lose her. It'd come out of the blue, just like in the future diary.

I didn't want that. I wanted to be with Sylphie for as long as I lived. I'd thought that feeling was mutual.

But that was about what I wanted.

Even if she ran out of patience with me in the end, I wanted to at least give her peace of mind here and now. I just had to work out how to do that...

I was still stewing endlessly over the question when Sylphie went into labor a mere week later. The whole time, Sylphie acted as if nothing was wrong. Maybe she really didn't think something was wrong. She wasn't the type to hold grudges over things like this. Maybe she'd been a bit disappointed at the time, but hadn't thought of it as that big a deal.

I don't think I'd been acting awkward either. For the past week, I'd been with Sylphie every moment I could as I frantically tried to decide on a name. I noted down every one that came to me and Sylphie and I discussed which ones we liked. Maybe to her, it looked like I was trying too hard. But I really wanted to try as hard as I could.

Then, her labor pains started. Eris knew what to do and ran for the doctor, while Lilia and Aisha got ready, Roxy stood by ready to

provide support with healing magic if necessary, and Leo took the kids to another room. I stayed at Sylphie's side the whole time. Soon after, Eris came back with the doctor. He looked a bit dazed, clasped under Eris's arm, but he quickly got deep into the work of preparations for the birth. We were all used to this. It was Sylphie's second time and my fourth child. Counting Aisha and Norn, I'd been present for five births. If you included my past life, there were a few more.

The doctor was experienced. No one here was new to this. A rock-solid lineup.

As we stood by, the birth began.

We were all relaxed, and everything was going smoothly, as it should...

"Oof..." The head had just come into view when the doctor let out a troubled sigh. In an instant, my reassurance faded and fear raced through me. Childbirth was still childbirth, no matter how experienced we were. I shouldn't have gotten complacent. Was it a breech birth? No, I could see the head, so that wasn't it... Surely it couldn't be a stillbirth...

Roxy stood up, staff in hand. "Healing magic?" she asked.

"No, that won't be necessary," said the doctor, and the birth continued. He carried on with the delivery, speaking to Sylphie only when absolutely necessary. As far as I could tell, nothing had gone wrong.

"...Ah, uwaaaah." A baby's cry broke the restless silence. A strong little voice. It wasn't a stillbirth. The doctor didn't say anything, just held the baby up. It looked fine to me. I honestly didn't think anything was wrong. But the doctor's face was still tense, and I knew why. I'd know as soon as I saw the baby. Why the doctor had sighed. Why he was so tense. I genuinely didn't think there was any problem, but I understood why he did.

It was the baby's hair. When Lucie was born, her wisps of hair had been light brown. When Lara was born, she'd been bald. I wasn't there when Arus was born, but when I saw him, his hair looked red.

We all stared in silence. There was Sylphie's second child, with a head of green hair. Yep, just like Sylphie, back in the day.

"No way..." Sylphie had gone pale. "Oh...oh no...it can't be..."

Roxy, Eris, Aisha, and Lilia were all totally unperturbed. They had no context for why Sylphie was reacting like this. We weren't lacking for kids with exciting hair colors in this house. Plus, Ruijerd and everyone else around here had green hair. No one would bat an eye at green hair.

Sylphie, though. Sylphie...was a different story.

"...Congratulations, it's a boy," said the doctor as Sylphie stared despairingly at the baby. He held him out to her and she accepted, but she kept glancing around, at a loss for what to do.

"Sylphie," I said.

I had to celebrate. There was no reason not to. I needed to express my joy and congratulate Sylphie. Then, I had to reassure her that everything was going to be okay. I smiled to give her peace of mind—or as much as she could have at the moment, anyway.

"You're okay, it's all okay. Thank you so much," I began, but before I could get any further, Sylphie replied.

"Rudy... I'm sorry..."

"There's nothing for you to be sorry for, look—whoa!" As I started again, her batteries seemed to run out and she slumped. Seeing the baby about to slide off the bed, I dived to grab him.

"Huh?" I said stupidly as Roxy and the doctor rushed forward, pushing me aside.

"Rudy! Get out of the way!" Roxy snapped.

Sylphie had passed out. I stared blankly as the two of them checked her vitals.

“She’s only fainted,” the doctor said, and the whole room relaxed.

I stood there, dazed, with the naked baby in my arms. Aisha came over with a blanket.

“Here, Big Brother, wrap him in this.”

“O-oh, yeah.” I reached out for the blanket as instructed.

Sylphie had been worried. She’d been wrapped up in an indistinct cloud of anxiety. And now, as if to prove her worries right, her baby had green hair. I wasn’t sure if she’d passed out from relief, or from all that stress reaching its peak.

Had I done more to set her mind at ease, maybe we could have avoided this. Maybe she wouldn’t have been worried about the baby having green hair.

I felt guilty. But I was also overjoyed. Sure, the baby had green hair. But that wasn’t any big deal. Nothing had changed.

Here was my fourth child. And I’d made sure to think of a name.

All of a sudden, I heard Eris’s voice pipe up from a corner of the room.

“What the *hell* are you doing here?”

She was talking to me—berating me for being so useless. Feeling like I’d been punched in the gut, I turned.

At least, that’s what I thought was happening. I was wrong.

“Huh?”

She wasn’t talking to me. There was another, shocking presence in the room. He was blond and wore a white fitted jacket, buttoned at the front like a school uniform, and matching trousers. His face was hidden behind a yellow mask designed like the face of a fox.

“Arumanfi...?”

Behind me stood one of the twelve familiars of Armored Dragon King Perugius, Arumanfi the Bright. His eyes were fixed on me. No—they were on the baby. The baby, with its green hair.

Then, he spoke. “Rudeus Greyrat,” he announced. “Lord Perugius summons you to the Floating Fortress.”

Extra Chapter:
The Monkey and the Dreaming Youth

Geese

I WAS IN A white room. There was nothing else here, just a white floor that extended on forever. I liked it here. It took me back to all those years ago when I was just a nobody brimming with hopes and dreams—young, inexperienced. Dumb as hell.

I was born in a little village in the south of the Demon Continent, free as a bird—except, 'cause I was too full of myself, I didn't think the village was good enough for me. I was cocky enough to think I was made for greater things, and so I ran away.

And did I achieve great things in the end? Nope, not a one. The only skills I picked up were things anyone could do—cooking, washing, cleaning... Yeah, I could draw a map, or negotiate, or disable a trap, but if you asked how I compared to an actual pro, well. Best not to dwell on it.

If I weren't such a pushover, maybe even I could've believed in myself, but the fact remained that I couldn't fight to save my life. My only purpose was to tag along after strong, amazing types and cover their weak points. You know how goldfish poop clings to them while they swim? That was me. All I had going for me were cheap tricks and a quick tongue.

When I was in this room, the fact that that same moron—that is to say, me—was somehow still kicking really hit home. But I wasn't gonna let it end like this. I was gonna achieve something big. Something that'd let me face myself in the mirror.

“Oh, yes. Of course, you can't let it end like this, I know *just* how you feel,” said a weirdly blurry figure. The Man-God.

It was spooky how your eye just slipped off of Him, how He was always popping up when I least expected Him. But He was also a strangely comforting presence for me. Ever since I was back languishing in my tiny village, He'd come to me in my dreams to give me advice. He was my holy Man-God.

"Sorry to interrupt when you're wallowing in sentimentality, but am I going to get an explanation any time soon?"

An explanation? What for?

"I am angry. You do know that only bad things will come if you don't stop avoiding my questions?"

Whoa there, don't get mad. If it's an explanation you want, ya gotta tell me what you wanna know.

"What possessed you to write that letter to Rudeus in Millis? Did we not discuss that your presence there was for the purpose of confirming how he fights?"

Ohhh, that old thing. That little letter where I declared war on him so as he'd know I'm a disciple of the Man-God. But see, the reasoning for that is a little tricky to put into words.

"I don't care how difficult it is. You will explain. Depending on what you say, I may have no choice but to unleash my divine wrath upon you."

Haha. Your divine wrath, eh? You already did that once. Pretty sure I don't have enough left to lose that much again, y'know?

Ah, whatever. I'll explain. I thought a whole lot about why I did it recently, so I've got an answer all drafted 'n ready to go.

"How very commendable of you."

Right?

"Now get to the point."

Okey-doke. Well, first of all, I made it through life with lies and deception. So I've got kind of a sense for when the game is about to

be up. There's a fuse on this kinda thing; an expiration date. I can just tell when a lie's about to be exposed.

It's safer to just get it over and done with, then do a runner...y'know? Better than being around in the moment when Boss twigged to it.

The Man-God made a thoughtful noise.

That was reason number two, though.

"Reason number two? Then what was reason number one?"

That was about being true to myself. You could also call it committing myself to this. See, in the end, however I talk, I'm scared. I reckon if I had to go up against Rudeus, along the way I'd get cold feet. So I'd leave myself an escape route. Then, if the plan went belly-up, I'd have an out to say I was never a disciple, and I could talk my way out. If the odds were against us, when the time came, I could turn traitor and go back to Boss's side.

If I was ready to back out at any moment, that'd be enough to turn a winning position into a losing one. Don't ya think? I do. Unfortunately, I can't fight for nothing. But time and time again, I've seen folks dive in knowing they might never come back out. Paul and Ghislaine were like that, even Elinalise sometimes.

That's the only way you win. And you can't do it if you get cold feet 'cause you're afraid to die. A strike only becomes a killing blow when you're ready to die when you throw yourself into it. That's how you bring down mighty enemies, far as I see it. So I wanted to force myself to be like that too.

"Hm. And so that's why you went to the trouble of leaving him a letter?"

Pretty much.

"I can't say I understand...but no matter. From my vantage point, I must question whether your willingness to die affects the bigger picture. It concerns me."

Whoa there, look who's talking! Who's the one who came sniveling to me like, "I can't win, help meee"?

"Yes, and it's precisely because of that that I am being so careful. I am relying on you."

Uh huh, and just like you wanted, I'm getting more and more people on our side to bump off Rudeus and Orsted. I'm all in.

"True. You do have a perfect recruitment rate so far. Even if it is only because I told you their weak points. From their childhoods to their desires, to the right time to approach them..."

I mean, okay, it hurts a bit when you put it like that... But hey, I'm still the one doing the talking, at the end of the day. A teensy bit more trust would be appreciated.

"Understandably so. I do trust you. But we are running out of time."

I get that. It's important we do it on the right day, yeah?

"Yes. He is Rudeus's weakness, so we have no choice but to use him. I have no doubt that it'll work."

Yeah? I wonder... No plan's ever guaranteed to succeed, y'know.

"I'm well aware of that. Ever since Orsted got involved, all of my plans have gone awry. I'm sick of it."

Even so, I'd rather get as many as we can on our side beforehand. Especially the next guy. He's a big one. Maybe on the same level as the first guy, or even stronger.

"Do you think you can do it?"

Come on, I rustle up some reasons for him to fight, get him worked up, then sneak around a bit setting things up behind the scenes. Before ya know it, you've got one reliable ally ready to go. Just like all the others, right?

"Good, good. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Heh. Keep flattering me like you mean it.

Anyway, where am I going tomorrow and how do I get there? You'd better have something good in store, here. I'm countin' on ya.

"Yes, of course. Tomorrow, when you wake, travel due west, then wait in the shadow of a boulder. You may sleep there if you like. Then, move off due west again when the sun sets. You will arrive at a village at daybreak. Go to the only tavern in the village. If you do so, you will surely find him...surely..."

With the Man-God's words echoing in my ears, I blacked out.

My eyes opened.

I rose, cracking my neck and checking all my parts were working. No tingling in my limbs. No indigestion. No weird growths on my skin. I was hungry, but otherwise fit as a fiddle.

I went out of my tent and stretched, feeling my back crack as I yawned. I watched the sun rise.

After that, I worked out what direction I was facing. My daily routine. Can't start the day without it.

"All righty," I said.

Desert stretched out before me, as far as the eye could see. This was the Begaritt Continent, the second most dangerous place in the world after the Demon Continent. This place was swarming with monsters just as vicious as any on the Demon Continent, and the environment was unforgiving.

I'd been raised on the Demon Continent and even I found myself thinking, *the second most dangerous?*

I mean, I got why. There's fewer monsters overall here, plus the eastern and northern regions are pretty safe. Stuff like that tricks you into thinking that the Begaritt Continent's not so bad. Meanwhile,

you could drop into the heart of any region of the Demon Continent and it'd be packed full of danger. There's not a safe corner in the whole place. 'Course, there's no denying either place was habitable for the truly determined.

"Let's get going." I packed up my things, then set off west.

The desert was empty, but that was just on the surface. Beneath the sand lay swarms of worms that could swallow you whole and scorpions with poison in their tails that'd slowly melt you into soup. But wait, there's more! Then there were the monsters that preyed on those guys. Those were even more fearsome. You'd have to have the chops of an A-rank adventurer or higher to fight your way through them all.

Although knowledge of the local monsters would do the trick too. Different sorts of monsters all behave differently. Some are territorial, some build nests, some rove about looking for prey. Then there's some that rely on sight, while others rely on sound... If you've got knowledge of their behavior, avoiding them as you travel is...well, it's tough, but not impossible.

The problem is that people can't beat a monster's sharp senses. Monsters that rely on sight see through most camouflage in an instant, and monsters that rely on sound pick up on the smallest noise. Monsters that lie in wait in their nests make sure you don't twig to their location, and monsters that rove about looking for prey have the stamina to chase you for days without rest.

'Course, what makes us strong is how we each have some of the different skills you need to get past monsters. Plus, I had the Man-God's protection. I could head due west without getting noticed by any monsters. Nothing to it.

Whoa there, don't let your guard down.

"Not like I've got enough tricks that I can afford to relax," I muttered to myself. "Gotta be real careful, eh?"

I kept heading west, never changing course. I'd wanted to buy a horse or a camel or something, but apparently, that'd bring the monsters down on me. This time I'd go on foot or not at all.

I was parched. I sipped a few drops from my canteen to rehydrate.

What made the Begaritt Continent even harsher than the Demon Continent? Gotta be the heat. On the Demon Continent, temperatures varied by region, but there were no extremes of hot and cold. Nowhere that got covered in snow like in the Northern Territories. Heat and cold both sap your strength and dull your judgment.

From time to time, I put a hand to my forehead and my neck to check there was nothing wrong with me. If I got really hot, that'd be a warning sign. I was doing okay for now, but if I kept walking on and on, I'd wear down eventually. Demons are tough, so even a hopeless lout like me is a bit more long-lasting than a human. But only an absolute moron would think that's enough to keep them alive.

I mean, ain't it plain to see? In the stories, even that Immortal Necross Lacross kicked it in the end. No saving grace even for immortal beings, eh?

"Welp, here I am." The enormous boulder appeared before me, shaking me from my thoughts. It must have been twenty meters tall, so big you had to crane your neck to get a look at it. It stuck up like a sore thumb out of the desert. That was where I'd stop to rest, just like the Man-God said.

Well, what d'ya know? Getting here was dead easy. I almost wanted to laugh.

I sat in the shadow of the enormous boulder for a while, not doing anything. Younger folks get restless at times like this. They feel like they gotta be doing something, but sometimes the best thing you can do is stop, if only so that you don't waste energy.

In the shadow of the boulder, there was a patch of Sandcherries, their berries gleaming like little lanterns. They had spikey, pale yellow leaves that blended in with the sand, and red flowers. You might think, seeing them, that those delicate blossoms wouldn't look out of place in a royal palace vase. Once you knew the truth about Sandcherries, though, you'd think very differently. You'd appreciate how terrifying this place was.

The Sandcherry's leaves and stem were covered in tiny prickles that contained a powerful toxin—so powerful that even antidote magic had no effect. Sandcherries only wound up in royal palaces when someone really wanted the royals dead. They were a rare commodity. A single sprig from these babies would be enough to set me up for a good while. Anyway. Thanks to the Sandcherries, monsters left this place alone. I pitched my tent, taking care not to touch any, then lay down. Rest time is weird. You gotta do it, but when you do, you can't do anything. Normally, I'd use the time to put together a dumb gadget or two...but I was traveling as light as possible, more's the pity. Nothing but the bare essentials to survive.

What did other folk do, I wondered. Did educated types read books? What did I do, back in the day...? Right, I fantasized. All my fantasies were about the kind of adventurer I was gonna be.

Hah, I bet the me from back then would be real happy to hear what I was up to now... Traversing a desert on the Begaritt Continent following the advice of a God, taking a nap in a safe spot surrounded by poisonous plants. All laid out like that, it sounds pretty cool, don't ya think? Might be a good story to tell at the tavern.

"Eh?" Looking over, I saw a Sand Rabbit sitting right beside me. It seemed it hadn't noticed me. Or maybe, compared to the monsters around here, it didn't see me as a valid threat. It hopped along, then stretched out its neck to take a bite of a Sandcherry.

Sandcherry Berries were as poisonous as the surrounding chaff, but this Sand Rabbit happily munched away on them without a care. When it was finished, it stuffed its cheeks till they bulged then hopped away again. Sandcherry toxins didn't affect it, I guessed. If I caught it and took it to, say, Millis, they'd pay through the nose for it—we were talking way more than your standard bounty.

Wait, that's right, I'm a demon—they'd slam the gates in my face.

I went on idling away the time, thinking about how there were always more things to uncover in this world.

I headed off at sunset and arrived at the village after walking for about three hours. The Man-God didn't let me walk while the sun was up, and along the way, I'd learned why.

A big old lizard lay dead on the road. Sorry, calling it that's a bit of an undersell, so let me try again. It was a dragon. A Yellow Naga. The dragons of the Begaritt Continent usually live in caves under the ground. They move through the sand like fish in water, mostly chowing down on Sandworms near the desert's surface. Strictly speaking, they were supposed to be closer to Wyrms than Dragons, but I mean, they were just as dangerous as Dragons. All the warriors in these parts thought of them as the same thing.

Its jaws were big enough to eat three of me at once; its body must've been a hundred meters long. It sat there in the middle of the desert, squashed flat like something had trodden on it. Scavengers had already eaten half of it. I didn't want to think about what kind of monster did it in. I got out of there before I met the same fate.

There was a landmark for the village: a boulder that shone bluish-white, so you could just about make it out from a distance. I had to wonder if it didn't draw monsters to the village...but well, I bet it was an important boulder to those in the area.

The village I arrived in was tiny. No more than a few buildings clustered together. The buildings were a mixture of packed-dirt hovels and tents here and there. It looked likely to vanish any day. There was one inn, one tavern, and one shop to tend to the populace. As you'd expect, no sign of the Adventurers' Guild out here. These folks were self-sufficient, selling whatever they could grow to the occasional merchant who passed through and buying what little they needed. Looking at this place convinced me that even my village hadn't been this small. Well, maybe it'd been about the same. Couldn't rightly remember.

I called in at the "tavern." It served a second purpose as the villagers' mess hall. A few workers with dark skin and powerful physiques were drinking and enjoying themselves after finishing up after the night shift. Curved swords unlike what I was used to hung from their belts. These were desert warriors.

There were lots of elderly folk and hardly any young people around. Yep, this had to be the rumored village of the desert warriors. Desert warriors operated all through the Begaritt Continent, but the stories said that when they got past their prime they retired to their home village to focus on childcare instead. When I walked in, they all stared at me with the same look of surprise. To be fair, I doubted many demons visited these parts.

"Welcome, guest...if that is what I should call you?" said a man with a ruddy face.

"Yep, I'm definitely a guest." I answered in Fighting God Tongue, holding up my hands to show them. Who knew what the gesture meant in these parts, but I mean, this was a pretty direct way to demonstrate I didn't mean no harm. Look, ma, no weapons.

"You don't look like a merchant," the man said.

"Yeah. I'm actually looking for someone. They're not from these parts, though..."

The man grunted in acknowledgement, then gave a satisfied nod.

“The one you seek is up there,” he said, pointing out the window.

Towering up out of the sand was an enormous boulder like the one I’d rested beside. The whole thing had this kind of gleaming glow to it. Magic stones embedded in it, maybe? Narrowing my eyes to get a better look, I saw it was scaffolded and had a ladder that extended up to the top. It looked a bit like a watchtower combined with a lighthouse.

“Got it. Cheers.” I said, flicking him a copper coin for the information.

“What’s this?” he said.

“For the info. You don’t do that?”

“That information wasn’t worth paying for.”

“Think of it like a sign of friendship, then,” I said. “C’mon, you don’t see coins like that every day, right? That there’s a Millis bronze coin, y’know.”

The man stared hard at me for a while, but in the end, he put the coin in his pocket, then brought his fists together in thanks.

Bet you’re pondering why I went with a Millis coin instead of money from these parts. Fact is that the teleportation circle plonked me down out here in the middle of nowhere, so I didn’t have time to go change my cash.

I left the tavern and headed for the dimly glowing boulder. The closer I got, the better I could appreciate its ginormous size. There was a scaffold platform and a ladder, but the boulder was so big that wasn’t much comfort. It looked like it might come to pieces when I was halfway up.

“Hey, I really gotta climb this thing?” I said. No one was around to answer me. Which meant the answer was, *Shut up and climb.*

Contrary to what I’d expected, the ladder was sturdy and there was no wind. The only thing making it difficult was the darkness, but I managed to make it to the top without my feet slipping.

The flat top of the boulder was studded with daggers stabbed into the rock, adorned with scraps of red cloth. There were mystical letters written on the surface, a bit like a magic circle. I’d seen this kinda place before. If my hunch was right, this was where the village’s youths came for their coming-of-age ritual. Or maybe they took the daggers of dead folks, tied a scrap of their clothing to the handle, and stuck them up here. My village had a ritual like that, too. Not that I’d ever done it.

I looked up. “Well, ain’t that a view?” I said to myself.

The sky was full of stars. Under the bright light of the moon, the desert shone blue. Stars continued along the curve of the sky all the way down to the horizon.

And wasn’t that ironic? See, the whole reason I wanted to be an adventurer was to see views like this. I wanted to see the yet-unseen sights that waited at the end of an endless adventure. Then, when I became an adventurer for real, all I ever saw was cold reality. Greed. Discrimination. Uncensored human nature, all of it sordid. It was the second I half-retired from adventuring and swore myself to the Man-God that I started coming to these sorts of places. Ya can’t beat irony like that.

“So what’s your deal? You’re not just here for the view, right?” I said, addressing another shape further up the boulder.

He was wrapped in several layers of ragged robes. He looked like a big ol’ pile of rags, to be frank, but I was pretty sure he was a person. I’d look like a schmuck if it really turned out to be a pile of

rags, but so what? I didn't stand to lose anything, chatting up a pile of rags.

"What if I am?" He replied. The voice of a young man. Phew. Not just a pile of rags, then.

"Then I'd say, 'I wouldn't think an important guy like you would go in for stargazing.'"

"What if I said that's not why I'm here either?"

"Then I guess I'd ask, 'So what're ya doing here?'"

"But I might not answer you. Isn't that right?"

"Uh huh," I said.

What the hell was the point of deflecting...? Still, going off his roundabout manner of speaking, this had to be the guy I was searching for.

"The truth is," he said. "I'm looking for the Master of the Begaritt Continent. A Behemoth."

Aha. I got my answer.

"The Master is always traveling around the continent, so there's no telling where it'll be. They say, though, that once every few hundred years it appears close to this boulder."

"And that 'once every few hundred years' is today?" I asked. He didn't reply, just slowly turned to face me. He was a young man, black-haired, with some baby fat still lingering around his chops. The look he gave me told me I was right on the money.

Then he said, "No, that's not it."

Okay, nix that.

"It was only ever a legend. I don't even know if this 'Master' really exists."

"What's got you sitting in a place like this, then?"

"Because it *might* be today."

Only real obsessive types talked like that.

“See, the Master passed this way once several hundred years ago, and since then, it hasn’t returned. So it might well be today, get it? It didn’t come yesterday or the day before. Several hundred years later might be today. Right?”

“You’re not wrong.” His eyes said he was serious. He really thought that tomorrow could be the day the Master happened by this big old boulder.

By the way, I’m pretty sure the only intel this kid had dug up on the Master was the “once every few hundred years it appears close to this boulder” tidbit. With only that to go on, he’d trekked out here to the back of beyond, then spent days and days sitting up here, waiting. He was a bonafide nutjob.

“What’s got you hunting the Master anyway? It kill your folks or something?”

“That’s pretty much it, actually.”

“Liar.”

He laughed. “You’re calling a stranger a liar? Hahaha! Well. I suppose it *was* a lie.”

Is it that funny? I thought as the kid cackled. But okay, maybe to him it was pretty funny. I asked him what he wanted to fight the Master for, he told me, then I’d called him a liar.

As it happened, I knew just how his parents were doing. Sure, his mom was dead, but his old man was practically too healthy for his own good. His grandma was pretty sprightly too, if you’re interested. Actually, I knew a whole bunch more than that. I knew when he’d get to see the Master, why he wanted to kill it, what he wanted to do afterward, and how things would go for him after that. Every bit of it. Not that I was gonna rattle that off for him. This kid was the type to get surly if I blurted it all out, which meant I had to get him to bring it

up first. You gotta get these types in a good mood and talking your ear off.

“So why are you here?” I asked.

“Hm. Have you ever seen someone great, and wanted to become greater still?”

“A few times, I guess.”

“There is a great hero I hope to one day surpass, so that I may become the greatest hero who ever lived.”

“What, and hunting the Master out here in the middle of nowhere is the ritual that’ll turn you into this super awesome hero?”

“No, that’s not it. I want to surpass this great hero, right? But then the problem becomes *how* I surpass him...y’see?”

“Don’t you have a duel with this great hero-dude and beat him?”

“Yes, there’s a logic to that. But that’s not the way for me.”

“It’s not?”

“People can’t always stay in their prime. Battles are swayed by conditions and luck. Winning a fight won’t do me any good if people say I only won by chance, or that I scored a lucky hit.”

Okaaay...

“Personally, I would never discount a victory won by chance or with a lucky hit. But the rest of the world isn’t so forgiving. You truly become great when other people call you great—not a second sooner.”

“Cool, so how d’ya get folks to call you great?” I asked.

“That’s easy. You do something a great person did. Right?”

“That’s why you’re here to beat the Master?”

“Bingo. I’m going to beat the Master...the largest Behemoth on the Begaritt Continent.”

There it was. That was his goal. Behemoths were the largest living things on the Begaritt Continent. They were massive creatures that even dwarfed Dragons, and they trampled everything in their paths. It was said they were invincible. And here this kid was to slay one.

Long ago, the great hero he wanted to surpass had slain one too. That tale had been passed down through the ages and spread to all corners of the world. Together with his companions, the hero overcomes adversity, saves suffering people, then goes to fight the giant Behemoth and emerges victorious. A heroic epic, y'know.

This kid was angling to do the same. Now, if you wanted to be real picky about it: he was alone, he wasn't overcoming any adversity, and there weren't any suffering people. He didn't have any grand reason to come after the Behemoth—unless you counted wanting to surpass his great hero.

Now here he was, waiting for the Behemoth with no idea when it might arrive, on top of a boulder in a backwater village in the middle of nowhere.

"That right, huh? Makes sense, since you want to be a hero."

To entice this knucklehead with his heroic aspirations, all I needed were words. He wanted to be the subject of a heroic epic? Awesome. I'd play the sage in the story who gives the hero his next test. Time to get into character.

"All right, I'll tell you why *I'm* here," I said.

"Oh? You didn't just happen to be passing by?"

"Didn't it strike you as odd? I'm not a merchant and I don't have a party. What's a pipsqueak adventurer like me doin', coming to a place like this?"

"Huh... Then you're saying..."

In my best prophet voice, I intoned, *“Set forth at daybreak with your back to the sun and walk half a day hence.”*

A heavy silence fell. The kid’s eyes were gleaming with undisguised interest in my sudden prophecy. Instead of replying, he turned around, lay a hand on the boulder, and stared at me. He even cracked a smile.

“If you win,” I added, “come back here. I’ll tell you something even better.” Then I turned to leave.

“Wait!” he called after me. “What does that mean?” I didn’t turn back or answer him. Couldn’t break character. Now, to make a quick exit...

Oops, that’s right—we’re on top of a giant boulder... Rats, I can’t just jump down.

I took hold of the ladder and set off down. The kid didn’t come after me, but as I descended I caught him watching me. There was a look in his eyes that set my hair on end.

My act had gotten a bit rough at the end there, but that was fine. Good enough, I assumed.

I woke the next morning to a loud rumbling.

Leaping to my feet, I ran out of my tent and looked around. Once I’d confirmed there was no imminent danger, I went through my routine check. I had a bit of a bellyache. I might’ve caught a chill in the night, or maybe the local food just didn’t agree with me. I holed myself up in the outhouse for nearly an hour, then headed for the source of the noise. No need to rush things. I knew what was about to happen, just like I knew what was happening right now.

I yawned as I walked along, following the sound. I came to a crowd at the entrance to the village. The old warriors were armed, the children looked anxious, and all of them stared out toward the distant horizon.

I pushed my way through the crowd, muttering, “Scuse me, coming through,” until I reached a place where I could see where the sound was coming from.

The scene that emerged could’ve come straight out of a myth. First, there was the giant beast. It was the weirdest thing I’d ever seen, and it had too many legs sprouting out of its body. Even at this distance, it was gargantuan—too big for me to even conceive of its actual size. It had to be five hundred meters long, at least. It made the dragon from yesterday look like a baby.

It was a Behemoth, and it was writhing in agony. It twisted and lashed out, sending up veritable tidal waves of sand every time it rolled over. The only reason we could still see it with all that dust in the air was because of how friggin’ big it was. If you saw a kitten rolling around like the Behemoth was, you’d assume it was shaking off a fly. This was different. The Behemoth was covered in blood. What’s more, something was running around on its back. Every time it moved, a new gash appeared in the huge beastie’s hide, spurting blood.

They were fighting. *Someone* was fighting that giant beast.

“Mommy,” whimpered a scared kid, clinging to his mother. The old warriors hardly seemed to breathe as they watched the fight.

The fight stretched on for a while. The writhing beast made no sound, just continued to thrash. No one could miss the desperation in its movements. It was fighting for its life.

The battle ended right after midday, as the sun began to turn toward the horizon. The Behemoth’s flailing grew more lethargic as it drew closer to death. Even as it bled out, it kept on writhing where it lay, refusing to yield. Its defiance didn’t last long. All of a sudden, it stopped fighting. It stood up and walked, slowly, like it was trying to get away. It was way too late for that, but I guessed the Behemoth hadn’t worked that out.

At the end, the behemoth stretched itself out to its full height. It pushed up on four of its legs...then let out a massive breath, and all the strength went out of it. It toppled back, as if to sit down, then it stopped moving altogether.

The moment it fell, the warriors all put their fists together and knelt, lowering their heads to the dead Behemoth. I didn't copy them, but just standing there felt kinda awkward, so I retreated to the back of the group. The warriors stayed as they were. It was like they were waiting for something.

At last, the sand cleared. As the carcass of the behemoth came into view, so did an approaching figure on the horizon. He wore layer upon layer of ragged robes and carried a great sword.

"A hero," someone said. One after another, other voices echoed the same word, clamoring for his attention.

"Hero..."

"Hero!"

"Hero!"

That's right, in this village they would honor anyone who slayed a Behemoth as a hero—as the strongest of all warriors—just like the hero of old who brought down a rampaging Behemoth and saved their village from ruin. The village warriors stood up and got ready to welcome him into the village.

The Behemoth wasn't threatening the village or anything this time, but no one cared about that. So far as the warriors were concerned, they'd look up to any warrior who could beat a Behemoth. When the figure reached us, however, he ignored the waiting warriors. He headed past them. Straight towards me.

"That wasn't the Master," he said.

"Yeah?"

"The Master is even bigger than that."

Ooh, there's a scary thought. So that was a runt? You're gonna mess up my sense of perspective.

He was right. It *wasn't* the Master. When this guy fought the Master, or so I heard, the battle would rage on for ten days, with our hero wavering on the border between life and death.

"Still, I thank you. Your advice allowed me to slay a Behemoth."

"You're very welcome."

"Now," he said, his gaze sharpening, "what was the 'even better' story you had for me?" He'd had the courtesy to take an interest in what I had to say. We could finally have a real talk.

Sorry, though, mate. Prophecy time is over. I'm a bit busy to tag along while you play hero.

"Yeah, about that. You wanna be a hero, right, kid? You wanna be even greater than this other great hero?"

"Not 'want.' I'm going to do it."

"Then, jeez! Don't ya think you're going about it all wrong?"

"What do you mean, 'all wrong?'"

"See, kid, right now you're copying the things this great hero did, yeah? Driving out Dragons and slaying Behemoths and stuff."

"Yes. If I can't measure up to what he did, no one will bother talking about me."

"Look," I replied, "if ya think about it, that's not gonna turn you into a hero."

"Well, I suppose not..."

He'd vanquished a Behemoth, and in this village, anyone who slew a behemoth was held up and honored as a hero. But the village was hardly in trouble. And the Behemoth hadn't done a thing to harm 'em. All the sorry beast'd done was get killed. It was hard to valorize hunting monsters 'cause you felt like it. That weren't heroic.

That's why I was gonna show him the path to becoming a real hero.

"You heard of the Superd Tribe?" I asked.

"Yes. A race of devils, weren't they? They say that during the Laplace War, the Superd went around killing both friend and foe."

"Some survived."

"Where?" he demanded.

"Hold ya horses, bud. Let me get to the end. See, there's a guy out there who's even worse than the Superd."

"Someone...worse?"

"You betcha. This guy's kinda like the root of all evil in the world, y'know? I reckon you'll have heard his name before, though."

The kid didn't reply.

"Number two of the seven great powers. The Dragon God Orsted." That got his attention. Putting on an air of importance, I spread my hands, tilted my head, and peered in at him. "You've heard of him, I'm guessing?"

I knew it all. What the kid was striving for. Who he was trying to surpass. And what that someone did, and what they couldn't. With that, it was easy to stir him up.

"He's made the Superd Clan his followers, and now he's sheltering them."

"The Dragon God isn't evil. He's one of the heroes who defeated the Demon God Laplace. By rights, he and the Superd Clan should be enemies."

"You're talking about the Dragon God from however many generations back, right? Times change, people get stupid. Right?"

"Well...I guess."

“But there, that’s where you’re different. You’re trying to surpass the previous generations. I think that’s admirable of ya.”

The kid had gotten real quiet. Despite being a chatty guy, now he fell silent. That was a sure sign he’d taken in what I’d said and was giving it proper consideration.

“You can kill the last of the Superd Clan and defeat Orsted,” I went on. “Then, you’ll be a hero for all eternity. Not to mention number two of the Seven Great Powers.”

No reply came.

“Just being great doesn’t make you invincible and irreplaceable. Anyone who ever had a heroic epic made about them had someone they were never able to beat. Know why? Because they never had the opportunity.”

The kid’s eyes went wide.

“You’re getting handed an opportunity. The chance for renown beyond what anyone’s ever had before. You might never get it again.”

The kid’s mouth was shut tight. He watched me closely.

Yeah, I get it. You gotta know even better than me, right? You looked up to him ever since you were little, you heard all about him from your mom and dad, and then when that wasn’t enough, you went all round the world collecting legends of him. All so you could be even better.

Guess what, kid? If you beat Orsted, you sure as hell will be.

“Impossible,” he said. “For years now, no one has known the whereabouts of the Technique God or the Dragon God or the Demon God or the Fighting God. No one knows where Orsted is.”

Ha, I thought ya might say that.

“True that. But I knew exactly where the Behemoth was.”

“It wasn’t the Master.”

“Hey, what d’ya want from me? The Master isn’t gonna show up here for another eighty years.”

“Is that right? Thank you for telling me. Eighty years from now, I’ll be back.”

“Well, eighty years from now is eighty years from now... Don’t ya want to try your skills against Orsted? He’s certified as the world’s strongest. Way stronger than the Technique God— if that guy’s even still kicking. He’s been crushing the competition since the Laplace War, and you get to challenge him.”

He stared at me. No way would this guy have ever looked at me if I weren’t working for the Man-God. We could have crossed paths at the Adventurers’ Guild and he’d have ignored me like you would a patch of weeds. I’m not the shy type, but I wouldn’t have had the guts to strike up a conversation with a guy like this. He’s one of the world’s few SS-rank adventurers, and he was on another level even among them. It’d be fair to call him the very best of the best. *That’s* who this guy was. Even I looked up to him. Back when I started adventuring, I’d wanted to be like the guy he was trying to surpass now. One day, I swore to myself, *I’m gonna accomplish great things like him.*

Then reality came and kicked me up the ass. I never accomplished so much as one great thing. I was an adventurer for a long time, and I saw things that you’d want to boast about back home. Problem was, I never did anything except watch. I fixed meals for the ones who accomplished great deeds, got everything set up for them, but when push came to shove, all I did was watch. It was like that with Paul, too. In the fight with the Hydra, I never got near the front line.

“All right,” he said. “So where is Orsted?”

“I’ll tell you, but there’s a condition.”

“I accept.”

“Whoa, there! I haven’t said what it is yet, have I? Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“A nobody like you would never hand anything over without setting conditions on it.”

“You’re not wrong,” I admitted.

I was on top of the world. This guy I’d looked up to since I was an adventurer was talking to me like an equal.

“It’s nothing too arduous,” I continued. “There’s two things. For now, you’re to go here—” I handed him a map, “—and then once you get there, I’ll tell you what comes next. One more thing—if we run into each other, act like you don’t know me. This is all top secret.

“As for the second thing: there’s a guy my employer wants dead. A follower of Orsted, separate from the Superd Clan. He’ll definitely try to stop you if you go near Orsted so, basically, I want you to do him in on the way.”

“Your employer?”

“Haven’t you dreamed of him? This real mysterious guy who gives you advice?” I asked.

“Yes,” he murmured, “I think I did have a dream like that, long ago... You follow his advice?”

“Well, y’know.”

The kid made a face that said *he* sure as hell wouldn’t follow any advice from a guy like that and shrugged. But I knew that weren’t true—not when I was here on the Man-God’s orders to bring him in. See, the Man-God only chooses folks He’s certain of. The Man-God’s a coward, you see; real cautious. If anyone blabbed at this stage of the plan, the whole thing would fall apart.

“Well? What’ll it be? I want a yes or no.”

“Yes, obviously,” he said. He made his decision, just like that. I liked that.

"I don't like the idea of killing innocents, but, as they say, sometimes you've got to get your hands dirty."

"‘They’ say, huh? I’ll take your word for it." Personally, I didn't like the idea of anyone accepting a mission to kill all those guiltless Superd without question, but hey.

I remembered back when I'd just barely started adventuring. Back when I almost died, and Ruijerd saved my life. Yeah, all right, I was just following the Man-God's instructions back then, too. But look, in my heart, I like to think of myself as an ally to the Superd Clan. I didn't have any nasty prejudices against them, certainly. But I've come this far. There's nothing for me to do but keep falling and steel myself for the final *splat*.

"Right, that's all," I said. "Try and hurry, all right?"

"Very well. I'll set off at once," he said, then started walking.

The old desert warriors tried to stop him, but he paid them no mind. He hadn't in any way prepared for a journey, but he strode off into the desert like you'd go for a walk in the park. They don't waste time once they make a decision, these guys.

"Heroes," I muttered.

I looked up to heroes too, long ago. The thing is, when you grow up and see your contemporaries trying to be heroes themselves, you realize just how fragile they are. Or maybe "young" was a better word... Admittedly, out of all of them, this kid was especially so.

"Right, I'll stay in this village today and wait for your next message, yeah?" I said to the air. Scratching my neck, I went back to the village.

On the way, something made me look back. I saw the figure of a man disappear into the desert. He'd been easy to fool and easy to manipulate, and even then, no one could deny his ability. But still... I couldn't feel secure surrounded by only guys like that. into matter

how much of a comfort it was, knowing they'd be on our side. But you can't win if you always go for the safe bet, y'know?

Well, holy Man-God—what do You have to say to that?



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